

QUESTION COMMUNITY

OCT explores the connection between language and belonging with Tribes

You can be in. You can be out. That goes for all of us, wherever we are. Every community, no matter how open, has its own rules and its own method of communication.

Billy's family is no different.

As loving and sickly dysfunctional as any modern family, this intelligent, uncouth brood feasts on words. The patriarch holds his family in an embrace of insults. His vituperation falls like a heavy snow, cocooning his children in his castigation until they are unable to leave the house and find their way in the world. Complaining and mediating alongside Billy are an opera-singing sister, a pot-smoking academic brother and an aspiring novelist mother. Everyone is desperately trying to be heard.

Billy is trying to listen. Born deaf into a family of hearing people, Billy's parents choose not to "raise him deaf." He never learned sign language, but he reads lips and expressions brilliantly; he can only "hear" what he can see.

When Billy meets a woman who teaches him American Sign Language and introduces him to the deaf community, he finally understands what it means to be heard. His love for each world forces him into a rocky boat ride between the two shores on which these rival tribes rest.

Premiering in London in 2010, *Tribes* is by relatively new playwright Nina Raine. Her mastery of language and understanding of community and communication make



COLIN GRAY, ELLEN CHACE, KARSTEN TOPELMANN,
JOE CRONIN AND MELANIE MOSER

this a fascinating play, but it's not perfect. The show slips along in a satisfying ride, helping you think about family, diversity and understanding. Then the plot takes a turn into the tiresome. In the last 20 minutes, major twists are introduced leaving issues unresolved in a way that made me wonder at Raine's editor. Not gilding the lily so much as waxing it, this odd plot shift is the only thing that holds the play back.

Raine nearly makes up for this bump in plotting by creating rich and challenging characters. Every actor had substantial work, and the cast is strong and loud.

Karsten Topelmann is excellent as Billy. The skills he had to master just to start the role are impressive, and he layers that with excellent characterization. Liv Burns as Sylvia has the most interesting role, as the hearing daughter of deaf parents who is going deaf herself. With a foot in each world and fluency in both languages, she balances between the two worlds, loving and resenting each. Ellen Chace is incredible as her character spends

much time in reaction to the thoughtless words and actions of others. It is always a pleasure to watch the work of veteran actor Joe Cronin. His Christopher is intense and hysterical.

Sound and communication appear as characters as well. Director Craig Willis' blocking feels like he's working in the round, although he has a three-quarter stage. Sometimes you can see actors' faces and begin to rely on watching them sign or speak, and at other times Willis will intentionally frustrate a portion of the audience by keeping an actor turned away. This works to illustrate the play's central theme of how language binds a community.

Strong artistic experiences open your mind to new truths about the world. By taking the concept of belonging and placing it in an arena many of us know nothing about, the deaf community, and somewhere we all know intimately, the family, Raine is able to help us rethink how we communicate with those we love. ■

Tribes runs through Saturday Feb. 1 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre.

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