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Stellar 'Gidion's Knot' puts spotlight on youth issues

By **Mike Pearson** Camera Theater Critic

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The conflict between teacher Heather Clark (Emily K. Harrison), left, and mother Corryn Fell (Tammy L. Meneghini) is a triumph for "Gidion's Knot." (Jess Childs / Courtesy photo)

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What: "Gidion's Knot"

When: 8 p.m. Jan. 10 and Jan. 16-18, 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Carsen Theatre, The Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut St., Boulder

Tickets: \$14 students, \$16 seniors, \$20 adults

Info: 303-444-7328 or [squareproducttheatre.org](http://www.squareproducttheatre.org) (<http://www.squareproducttheatre.org>)

Parents' guide: The show is appropriate for ages 13 and older

If you believe that theater should be warm and comfortable, caressing you from the inside like a cup of mushroom soup, "Gidion's Knot" will almost certainly disappoint you.

If, on the other hand, you expect more from the stage — confrontation, drama, empathy, rage — this is a play that will almost certainly astonish you, delivering a tsunami of emotional twists that will leave you feeling like detritus washed up on some psychological shore.

And all this in a mere 80 minutes.

Currently being staged at The Dairy Arts Center by square product theatre and Goddess Here Productions, the regional premiere of "Gidion's Knot," Johanna Adams' brief, bruising drama, is the very definition of contemporary theater. It traffics in issues of the day: childhood, parenting, the role of teachers, the power of the Internet.

And yes, alas, bullying.



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Just when you think you've figured out the arc of the plot — a distraught mother visits her son's fifth-grade teacher after his untimely death — Adams surprises you. Nothing is more devastating than the death of a child, unless it's the need to assign blame for his passing.

Corryn Fell (Tammy L. Meneghini) shows up at her son's school in a bitter mood. She's come to keep the parent-teacher appointment she made before her son's death three days earlier. She's been summoned, as it were, to be told that 11-year-old Gidion is a discipline problem.

His teacher, Heather Clark (Emily K. Harrison), can't fathom that Gidion's mother has walked into her classroom only days after his death. Heather assumed the conference was no longer needed. She and the rest of the school are in mourning. They don't know the circumstances of Gidion's death, but they ache at the loss.



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Tammy L. Meneghini's performance as mother Corryn Fell forms a love-hate relationship with the audience. (Jess Childs / Courtesy photo)

Get involved

After the 2 p.m. matinee of "Gidion's Knot" on Saturday, Jan. 11, there will be a community discussion about issues raised in the play, such as bullying, censorship and other difficulties faced by today's youth. The discussion, which is free and open to the public, is expected to start about 3:30 p.m. in the Carsen Theater at The Dairy Center for the Arts..

The discussion will be moderated by Dr. Amanda Giguere, education director for the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. In addition to the cast and director of "Gidion's Knot," the talk will feature prominent experts on topics raised in the play, including Heather Crate, OASOS (Open and Affirming Sexual Orientation and gender identity Support) program coordinator for Boulder County Public Health; Jason Giguere, counselor for

That's not good enough for Corryn. Why was her son suspended for five days, she asks with the vitriol of a she-bear on the prowl. Why does Miss Clark keep stalling?

Where's the principal who was supposed to join them for this conference? Corryn slings questions like javelins, yet you quickly sense that there can be no satisfactory answers. Here is a woman whose grief masquerades as cruelty.

Initially perceived as the cornered prey, mousy Miss Clark discovers a spine during the course of the encounter. Should she tell this woman that her son wasn't so much bullied as the bully?

Boulder Valley School District, and Dr. Beverly Kingston, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

That his great gift — the ability to write — was misused against other students? Should she accept Corryn's charges of her negligence as a teacher, or volley them back as accusations of inept parenting?



Oh, the humanity. "Gidion's Knot" is less about the child in question than about how society perceives its young. Are they truly innocents, or wise and manipulative? And what of the caretakers: Do parents and teachers harm the young by approaching education with radically different expectations?

Adams' play is not a perfect construct. The early going is filled with pregnant pauses that don't generate the tension they intend. And director Wendy Franz is only partially successful in utilizing her own festive classroom set. Too often the performers are talking at each other's backs.

What works here allows what doesn't to be forgiven. The performances are superb. Harrison proves deceptively ferocious as an educational mollusk torn from her shell. And Meneghini is nothing short of amazing as a woman swimming upstream against her grief. You don't know whether to throw your arms around her or have her institutionalized.

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Emily K. Harrison as teacher Heather Clark transforms from mousey to ferocious during the course of "Gidion's Knot." (Jess Childs / Courtesy photo)

Two-character plays can be tricky to write because they require actors of equal stamina and a plot that eschews redundancy. Saying the same thing five different ways isn't progress. Fortunately for audiences, "Gidion's Knot" builds upon each emotional note, resolving itself in a way that will both inspire and break your heart. No warm soup here. This tangle of traumas is often scalding.

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