



Denver Center Theatre Company *Hamlet*

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# In *Gidion's Knot*, adults try to untangle a student's dangerous words

By **Juliet Wittman** Thursday, Jan 9 2014

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Tammy Meneghini and Emily Harrison in *Gidion's Knot*. *Jess Childs*

The setting for *Gidion's Knot* is familiar and innocuous — a brightly colored children's classroom with low tables and plastic chairs, student papers neatly tacked up on one board, another board covered with drawings inspired by mythology. But a psychological whirlwind will soon be let loose in this setting, in a charged confrontation between teacher Heather Clark and Corryn Fell, the mother of a suspended student — a whirlwind that's a potent mix of ancient violence ("I believe in Shiva," says Fell) and such modern concerns as children's sexuality and

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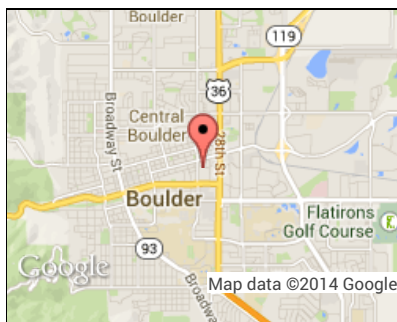
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creativity versus conformity.

Fell has arrived for a meeting that the teacher had erased from her schedule, and Clark is nonplussed. She directs Fell to the school office, and asks her to come back when the principal can be with them. But Fell is insistent and implacable. We soon learn that eleven-year-old Gidion committed suicide after bringing home the note about his suspension. His mother is desperately trying to piece together his reasons and the events of his last hours, and she wants any scrap of information Clark can give. But more than that, she blames Clark for Gidion's death — and she's out for revenge. The name "Corryn" means spear, while "Fell" means to strike down and, also — as Shakespeare uses it in *Julius Caesar* — deadly and cruel: "Blood and destruction shall be so in use," says Marc Antony after Caesar's murder. "And dreadful objects so familiar/That mothers shall but smile when they behold/Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war/All pity choked with custom of fell deeds."

Clark eventually reveals the reason for Gidion's suspension: an essay he wrote filled with killings, gouged-out eyes and twisted entrails, with the victims named for his teachers and classmates — and Fell's reaction is unexpected.

### Location Info



**Dairy Center For the Arts**  
 2590 Walnut St.  
 Boulder, CO 80302  
 Category: Community Venues  
 Region: Boulder  
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### Details

Presented by Square Product Theatre and Goddess Here Productions through January 18, Dairy Center for the Arts, 2590 Walnut Street, Boulder, 303-444-7328, [squareproducttheater.org](http://squareproducttheater.org).

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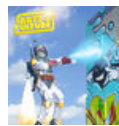
At this point, our reactions are as ambivalent as Clark's and Fell's are clear. Should Gidion have been suspended for this essay? We all know how conventional education in the United States can be, and how miserable creative or eccentric kids often feel at school. Yet we've also read articles about murderous young monsters whose writings were filled with images of mayhem. Every time, we wonder if these images were ignored, whether a teacher or counselor could have found a way to intervene. So does the guilt for Gidion's death lie with unimaginative Clark, or with his mother, an academic who specializes in *The Poems of Ossian* and whose devotion to literature apparently blinded her to the effect of the tales she read to her impressionable child at bedtime? Neither, it turns out. Because there's still one more twist in *Gidion's Knot*.

The play, by upcoming playwright **Johnna Adams**, fits well with Square Product's mission of showing innovative work. Adams has said that it was born in part out of her own fear as a kid that her writing would be seen by teachers as too dark. The script is uneasily compelling — taut, smart, funny and ferocious. But there are a couple of problems. The actual story behind Gidion's death isn't nearly as original or believable as most of what preceded it. More important, the dead child at the center of the furor never feels real, which gives the play far

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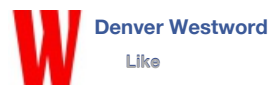
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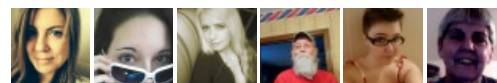
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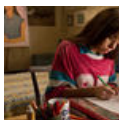
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less emotional impact than it should have. The vagueness of Gidion's outline may result from his mother's arrogance (she doesn't bother concealing her contempt for Clark's dual master's degrees in marketing and education) and her narcissistic blindness. How could she describe a son she herself never saw clearly? She seems more than a little unbalanced, and while you understand the grief and need that underlie her prickly persona, you aren't moved by them.

It's much to Tammy L. Meneghini's credit that she never sentimentalizes Fell, and her performance ends up as powerful as it is painful and corrosive to watch. Unassuming Clark may have seen Gidion more clearly than his mother ever did, but Adams keeps Clark's dialogue firmly focused on necessary plot points and never gives her leeway to reminisce about the flesh-and-blood kid she taught — not a single detail that might bring him to life, nothing about the foods he liked, for instance, or what games he liked to play. Emily K. Harrison — who is also artistic director for Square Product and is a *Westword* Colorado Creative — is a quietly touching Clark, although her silences don't communicate as much feeling as Meneghini's passionately verbal retreats, advances and descents.

*Gidion's Knot*

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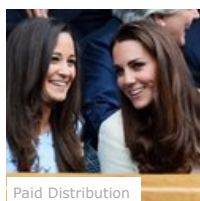
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