

A deaf in the family

Peppermint Creek drama explores family communication in a different way

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by [Mary C. Cusack](#)



For those who have wished they could tune out their family during a Christmas fight over who ruined the childhood of whom, Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.'s "Tribes" will serve as a cautionary tale. There is a fate worse than suffering petty familial bickering: Sitting on the sidelines in silence.

"Tribes" is a tightly written, multi-layered story about a person's role in various social structures. Billy (Devin Fraught) was born deaf to a hearing family. They raised him to read lips and speak instead of learning sign language. His well-meaning parents believed this would give him a more normal life.

As the play opens, all of the adult children have returned to the nest, lorded over by former professor Christopher (Michael Hays) and aspiring novelist Beth (Jackie Payne). Eldest son Daniel (Chad Badgero) is in the throes of a break-up, and vacillates between writing a dissertation and smoking pot. Daughter Ruth (Crysta Harper) is trying to build a career as a singer.

Billy comes home from college and is thrust into the non-stop chaos of a family of creative types who are constantly trying to hoard all of the attention. Their fast-paced patter is more than even a hearing person can process, so Billy has no chance of keeping up. Instead he sits quietly, waiting for someone to fill him in on the goings-on.

Billy meets Sylvia (Meghan Malusek), a woman born to deaf parents who is gradually losing her hearing. She teaches Billy to sign, and he soon embraces the deaf community and culture. He finally feels a sense of belonging, which leads him to perceive that he's been a mascot for, not a member of, his family.

Although the script investigates relationships in multiple configurations, the most fascinating is that between Daniel and Billy. In the beginning, Daniel is too wrapped up in his own melodrama to pay attention to Billy, and at times seems either jealous or resentful of his brother's presence. But as Billy pursues his independence, it becomes apparent that Billy provides a sense of security and stability for Daniel that is critical to his well-being.

Badgero is excellent in this role. His vicious sibling rivalry with Ruth rings true, as does the tender need he projects upon Billy. Fraught's performance as Billy is amazing, from the vocal control he exhibits as a deaf speaker to the range of emotion he expresses. At first quiet and seemingly content in his silent world, when he finally explodes in resentment it is cathartic, if not a bit misplaced.

Malusek brings grace to her role, especially when showing the poetic beauty of sign language. She also reflects the vulnerability of a young woman facing her impending disability realistically with fear, anger and acceptance.

As with real life, the denouement lacks a clear resolution. The end signifies the beginning of the next phase in the evolution of this family unit who will face what comes with newfound solidarity.

"Tribes"

Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. 8 p.m. Thursday– Saturday, April 3-5 \$15/\$10 students & seniors 6025 Curry Lane, Lansing (517) 372-0945, peppermintcreek.org