



Nancy Santos Photography

Perfectly Normel People

Everybody's Normel

Local playwrights tackle touching family comedy

BY ELIZABETH PANDOLFI

What happens when you take a sheltered Midwestern kid and plop him into the middle of a loud, pushy Italian family from Queens? This is the premise of *Perfectly Normel People*, the second play by local playwrights (and married couple) Judy and Thomas Burke Heath.

Hot on the heels of their first production, *The Sunset Years*, *Perfectly Normel People* is a memory play that follows Midwestern NYU college freshman Hadley during the craziest time in his life: the months he spent boarding with the Italian-American Normellino family. "It's about worlds colliding, but it's also about love, family, loss," Thomas says. "The [Normellino] family has experienced a lot of loss in their lives. Part of the dynamic of the family is that they mask that hurt with sarcasm and arguing."

The landscape of grief is familiar territory for Judy, a psychotherapist who specializes in bereavement and the author of *No Time for Tears: Surviving Grief in America*. "Humor is the way [the Normellinos] release it, get it off their chest," she says. "Being Italian, they don't let anything build up." Thomas adds, "The show is about change: how Hadley changes the Normellino family and how they change him over this short period of time." It's a comedy, but with deep emotional waters beneath all the laughs — as there so often are in real life. This is one of the most important creative issues for the Heaths. "I truly believe, based on the feedback we get, that our plays are relatable," Judy says. "They're reflective of people's real lives. In our first play, we have a gay couple, and something that really touched me was after a performance, a woman came up to me and said, you know, my daughter is gay, and I could really relate to what was happening."

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As a writing team, the Heaths are deeply appreciative of each other's strengths and eager to work together to address any weak points. Writing *Perfectly Normel People* presented an interesting challenge for their collaboration skills, as the story began its existence as a 10-minute screenplay scene that Thomas had written years earlier. "The big thing for me, was, OK, now I'm working with a writing partner on something I'd written 10 years earlier," Thomas says. "Can we bring it to life again? Can we achieve this together?"

The answer, it appears, is a resounding yes. The show was recently performed at the Greater Park Circle PLAYFEST to great acclaim. "We had people coming up to us afterward, Italians, saying 'Were you listening in on my family?' But what was so great is we also had Southerners, people who've never seen families like the Normellinos, saying, you know, family's family," says Thomas, who directs the play.

Watching the actors bring the script to life is one of Judy's favorite parts of the creative process, and she has nothing but the best things to say about the cast who will be sharing their work with festival audiences. Speaking about Laura Allred, who plays the young Normellino daughter, Judy says, "I think she's one of the most gifted actresses I've ever seen. She's playing this Italian girl from Queens, and it just comes from within her — gestures, these facial expressions. I don't understand how she gets them." The technical staff at Footlight also receives high praise from Thomas: "Richard Heffner is a brilliant technical director."

With such a great team bringing *Perfectly Normel People* to life, it's easy to foresee success for the Heaths on an even larger stage: Their plan is to eventually bring their play to off-Broadway. "This is going to be historic. We're working hard to bring this play up to New York, so wouldn't it be cool to be able to say, 'I saw it first?'" Thomas says.

PICCOLO SPOLETO, *Perfectly Normel People*.

May 25, 31, June 2 at 8 p.m. May 26, June 3 at 3 p.m. May 28 at 5 p.m.
\$26, 21/seniors, students.

Footlight Players Theatre, 20 Queen St. (866)811-4111