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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## Theater: Gay Boy Scouts On The Prowl In "Wild Animals"

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**WILD ANIMALS YOU SHOULD KNOW** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**LUCILLE LORTEL THEATRE**

If you're studying nature and come across an unexpected creature or observe unusual behavior, you shouldn't get distracted by anything else. Keep your focus on the prize you've discovered. That's a lesson for playwright Thomas Higgins, who has nailed down some fresh relationships and intriguing moments in his new play *Wild Animals You Should Know*. But instead of focusing in on those interesting new creatures, he gets distracted by the ordinary and mundane.

The heart of his new drama is the odd friendship between Jacob (Gideon Glick) and Matthew (Jay Armstrong Johnson). In one of several marvelous scenes, the show begins with Jacob and Matthew chatting online via video. Matthew is dressed in his full Scout uniform and reciting the Boy Scout code as he sexily removes the cap and scarf and then unbuttons his shirt in a slow strip tease. It's Jacob's birthday and Matthew has promised the full monty. Jacob is gay while Matthew is straight-ish but enjoying the attention of Jacob's desire and, yes, getting off on it himself. When Matthew says he's not gay but it just so happens that Jacob "gives really good blow-jobs," you might wonder who is kidding who. Still, when Matthew insists he's just narcissistic, it rings true. Their dynamic -- of friendship and sex, of an ostensibly straight kid dominating and yet needing the approval of a gay kid -- is a rich one.

During that first scene, Matthew realizes a neighbor has been watching his strip-tease. Turning the

tables, Matthew trains some binoculars on the neighbor who is apparently on a date of his own. When Matthew realizes it's their Scoutmaster Rodney (John Behlmann) and that the man is closeted, you know an upcoming camping trip will be fraught with danger for everyone.

That weekend in the woods offers another sensational few scenes -- Matthew toys with Rodney, crudely revealing his knowledge about Rodney's sexuality and then later daring and threatening him in equal measure when they're alone. It's electric stuff with Behlmann handsome enough to turn any teen from questioning to answering and Johnson savoring the role of Matthew, a complex character who does one questionable act after another but never becomes something as simple and dull as the villain or a closet case.

Unfortunately, the show wastes a great deal of time on other characters. Matthew's dad Walter (Patrick Breen) has just lost his job at work, something his wife (Alice Ripley) takes in stride but which he doesn't reveal to his son. We watch him pack for the weekend camping trip and despite two fine actors and little details of character (she asks which clothing he'd prefer and then packs whatever she wants anyway), it's of absolutely no interest. Dad bonds with Larry, the slobby father (Daniel Stewart Sherman) of another Scout, drinking and sharing stories while he learns Larry's wife has left him. Do we care? Not in the least.

Later diversions from the heart of the matter include Jacob's rambling tale to Walter of how he and Matthew reignited their friendship after years of drifting apart or scenes of Scoutmaster Rodney dealing with neighborhood abuse. That merely reminds us that we should know more about Jacob and Matthew's relationship. They chat online but does Matthew ignore Jacob in school? Or has he truly befriended him? We just don't know and that's not right. Other questions abound.

It's strange: Walter realizes his son Matthew has probably done questionable things but instead of apologizing to Rodney he wants to know why the hell a gay man would join the Scouts, as if the very act were suspicious. The reason propounded by the playwright is a vague cliché about a dead lover who was an Artist. But what's the mystery? Unless one believes a gay man can't be around teenage boys without preying on them, why is it so puzzling that an adult who loves the outdoors and wants to share that appreciation would become a Scout leader? Can't Rodney just say he loves the Scouts and wanted to continue the tradition and was willing to accept the humiliating situation of having to lie in order to do so? It was a sacrifice he as an adult was ready to make. We can see Jacob truly in love with Scouting as well, so it's clear how this could happen.

Instead, something darker might possibly be at work, as raised in the suggestive climax that is partially unearned; in a better play, it would lead to characters grappling with the questions raised, rather than just raising them. Still, director Trip Cullman scores in the scenes where something fascinating is going on and adds detail and polish to the scenes that don't. The scenic design by Andromache Chalfant makes effective use of video projection of stylized settings to suggest the anonymity of the suburbs and the starkness of nature. The costumes of Jenny Mannis are spot-on, though Scout uniforms are the sexiest thing on display. Fitz Patton's sound design usefully sets the mood, especially in the key camping moments. And the lighting by David Weiner is very strong throughout, capturing the subtle shifts in mood and the dangerous switch from intimate to intimacy, from sexy to scary.

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Glick starts off strong as the gay Jacob, though his offbeat line readings grow less effective as the show goes on. This is more the fault of the play than a fine actor because the show loses interest in Jacob. It's frustrating in particular that we get no sense of the relationship of this teen and Rodney, arguably the only other gay character in the show and an adult who shares his passion for Scouting. Does Rodney avoid him because Rodney fears being associated with what is likely a gay Scout? Does Rodney want to be a positive mentor? Does Jacob reach out to him for support? Not discovering how these two might relate to each other isn't just a wasted opportunity; it's a gap that feels wrong.

Also wasted are Breen, the marvelous Ripley and Sherman, all portraying relatively minor roles, ones with little depth or interest. Behlmann is very good as Rodney, capturing both his sincere love of nature and Scouting while quietly hinting how this intense connection might be a substitute for something lacking in his life. And Johnson is magnetic and mercurial as Matthew, reveling in this character's many layers, the excitement over his burgeoning sex appeal and the power that gives him. You can't keep your eyes off him, which is exactly how he likes it.

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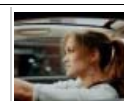
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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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