

## THEATER

# After Ashley Makes A Statement At New York's Vineyard Theatre

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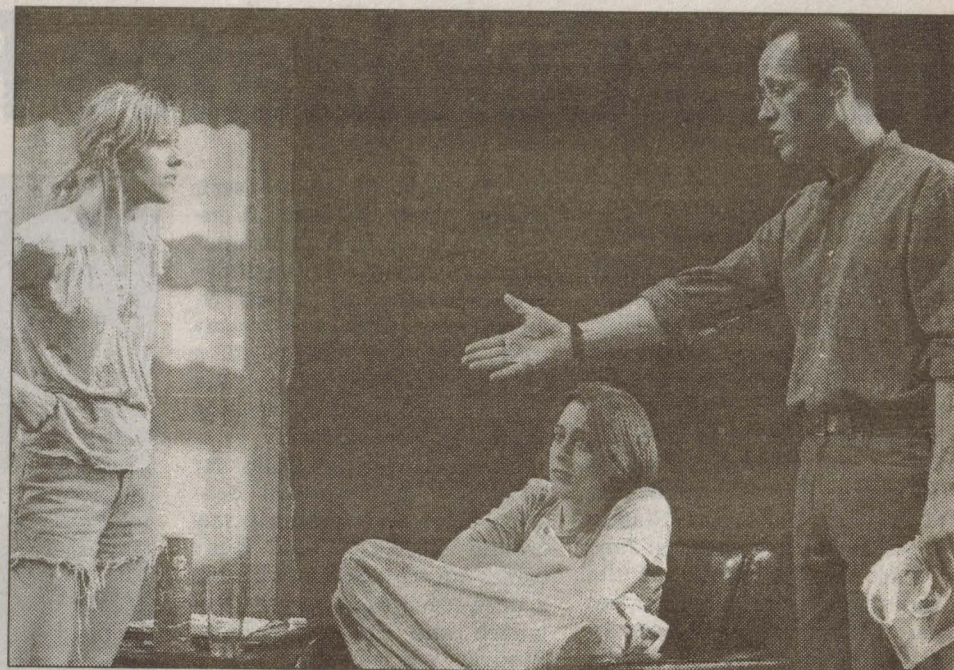
In what is perhaps one of the most intelligent and entertaining theatrical productions currently on the New York stage, writer Gina Gionfriddo brilliantly captures the absurdity of our nation's misguided priorities and the consequences of such blindness. Her highly anticipated new play *After Ashley* expertly exudes a forgiving, yet subtle self-importance while telling a rational, humanistic tale of the lives that get stuck in the ignorant whirlwind of farcical fame. The mediocrity with which

many of us come to reluctantly settle becomes a newly discovered, gratifying position.

It would be an extreme understatement to say that *After Ashley* is entirely a smarmy jab at the United States' obsession with celebrity. Packing a punch where it hurts most, *Ashley* is the searing, yet witty tale of 17-year-old Justin (Kieran Culkin), and his struggle to come to terms with a media driven reality that has deranged the core of a personal tragedy. When his tortured past turns him into a national figure, multiple manifestations of a corrupted society rear their ugly heads. The sarcastic, bitterly sweet humor of his persona is poignant and hysterical, making for an engaging and sentimental production.

*Ashley* eases its audience into its world in a deceptively tiresome manner. Justin is given a gratuitous account of his mother's discontent with her husband in a conversation that no mother has with her son. Dana Eskelson portrays Ashley, a matriarch and wife full of cliched regrets and disillusionment. She hates children, and wants to cheat on her sensibly stone-faced spouse. Her violent death sets the stage for a media storm. Her widower Alden (Tim Hopper) banks on the tragedy in his novel, *After Ashley*. He soon gets swept into the mockery that is modern television programming by the oozing narcissist David (Grant Shaud), a crime-genre television producer. Justin struggles to stand by his mother's memory with the help of his goth-chic girlfriend Julie (Anna Paquin) and a colorful visitor from Ashley's past.

*Ashley's* story moves only so far as its ce-



Photos Courtesy Carol Rosegg

**Dana Eskelson as Ashley Hammond, Kieran Culkin as Justin Hammond and Tim Hopper as Alden Hammond**

and the resulting anger, Culkin's torment is thick and probing. Equally funny and intense, a flawless cast embodies roles that seem to have been constructed for them. Grant Shaud (of *Murphy Brown* fame) delivers the most fascinating performance as David, never missing a beat as his morale is slowly picked away. Shaud's television personality is sadistically capricious, personifying the disturbing ironies that are webbed so intricately in all forms of media

tent story.

Director Terry Kinney (well-known for his regular role on HBO's *Oz*) takes *Ashley* to a personal level that is lacking in most theatrical productions. Playing it as funny as it is intense, and as ironic as it is true, Kinney stages a glimpse into a world that audiences know all too well. Their simultaneous shame and glee at a small window that mirrors their own media scorched



**Kieran Culkin as Justin Hammond in Gina Gionfriddo's *After Ashley*.**

the profundity of the script. Gionfriddo has developed characters that are never standoffish; these are reflective individuals, people with common revulsions, concerns, and guilty pleasures. Culkin is sarcastic and childish, and as bitter as any young man in the grips of angsty teendom. With the added weight of a personal loss

Culkin in *After Ashley* after co-starring with him in the London premiere of Kenneth Lonnergan's *This Is Our Youth*. The only performer that is entirely interchangeable, Paquin never gives Julie the life she fully deserves. However, Paquin's eagerness and sensuality inject a short burst of intrigue into Gionfriddo's consis-

Performances of *After Ashley* run through April 3 at The Vineyard Theatre (108 East 15th Street), Tuesdays-Fridays at 8 p.m.; and Saturdays at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$50. For performance and ticket information, call the Vineyard Theatre box office at 212-353-0303 or visit [www.vineyardtheatre.org](http://www.vineyardtheatre.org).