



LAWRENCE E. MOTEN III

A play that's passionate about being fun

BY CELIA WREN

Ryan J. Haddad dials up the candor early on in “Hi, Are You Single?” The autobiographical one-man play, which begins streaming Monday on demand via Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, in association with Los Angeles’s Iama Theatre Company, opens with a phone-sex scene.

A playwright and actor known in part for his recurring role on Netflix’s “The Politician,” Haddad has cerebral palsy, and he wants “Hi, Are You Single?” to counter the tendency to view people with disabilities as lacking in libido or sex appeal.

“The total way the world desexualizes disability is what I’m trying to fight against,” he said in a Zoom interview, noting the importance of his show’s frank, if humorous, opening moments,

Haddad’s show explores the funny side of having different abilities and finding love and intimacy

which highlight the gay protagonist’s carnal appetites. “I don’t give you a choice but to accept: These are the terms. This is the character,” Haddad says.

In the now-funny, now-bittersweet show, that character — whom Haddad describes as a “hypersexualized” version of himself — seeks love and intimacy on Grindr, in bedrooms, and in bars. Along the way, he meets with narrow-mindedness and rejection by potential partners unable to accept, or see beyond, his disability. But he also flubs warmer encounters and confronts his own shortcomings. The show makes clear that “I am not exempt from hypocrisy and judgment and shallow, ignorant behavior,” the 29-year-old play-

wright observes.

Haddad began working on “Hi, Are You Single?” as an undergraduate at Ohio Wesleyan University, on the advice of mentors. A milestone in the play’s development came when the Ohio native made a trip to New York and, for the first time, visited gay bars. The memory is still vivid.

“The stares and the confusion and the pity and the silence from the gay men I was interacting with in these bars were indicators to me that they didn’t think I belonged, as someone with cerebral palsy, as someone with a disability,” he says.

Around that time, he was realizing that, in film, television and theater, he had never seen characters with disabilities depicted as

desirable or capable of passion. He began to wonder whether that lack of representation was a factor in the attitudes he had encountered at the bars. A vision for his solo piece came into focus.

While an apprentice at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, he met Laura Savia, then overseeing the organization’s training programs. (She is now associate artistic director.) She was “blown away” by his talent, she says, and eventually signed on to direct “Hi, Are You Single?”

The play had subsequent airings around the country, including in New York at the Public Theater’s Under the Radar Festival in 2017. Savia was struck by how effectively Haddad connects with theatergoers. “It’s when an audience shows up, even if it’s in a workshop setting, that Ryan comes to life,” she says. “I think

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Where to watch

HI, ARE YOU SINGLE?
Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. woollymammoth.net.

Dates: Available to stream Monday through Feb. 28

Prices: \$15 in advance; \$20 after Sunday.

Ryan J. Haddad, writer and star of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and the Los Angeles company IAMA Theatre Company’s “Hi, Are You Single?” Haddad, who has cerebral palsy, says he plays a “hypersexualized” version of himself in the show. “The total way the world desexualizes disability is what I’m trying to fight against,” he said.

he's part standup comedian."

But "Hi, Are You Single?" did not land a substantial run until Woolly committed, initially scheduling the show for a 2020 summer festival, before the pandemic forced a shift to streaming.

Meanwhile, Haddad had won Iama's 2020 Rhimes Unsung Voices Playwriting Commission, sponsored by "Grey's Anatomy" creator Shonda Rhimes. The relationship with Haddad led to Iama's partnering with Woolly.

"We have done the play in so many places, in so many incarnations, but never with a full production" until now, Savia says, noting that the opportunity generated a design process that really allowed the play to "level up." For example, when creating distinctive bar and club sounds for the story, sound designer Tosin Olufolabi used music largely by artists with disabilities.

Because Savia was unable to travel to Washington, Jess McLeod — who had been staging Woolly's "There's Always the Hudson" when covid-19 suspended that production last spring — came on board as an additional director. Haddad's "fabulous and really idiosyncratic" sense of humor and "commitment to interrogating the world around him and himself" helped make the project irresistible, she says.

In adherence with a 28-page pandemic protocol that governed rehearsals and filming, "Hi, Are You Single?" had a three-camera shoot at Woolly in November, before an audience of 13 theatergoers (not counting the production team) who had been tested for the virus. Haddad says his television experience (which also includes "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt") helped him calibrate

his acting for an occasion that bridged a film shoot and live theater.

"Hi, Are You Single?" assumes its streaming form at a time that arguably gives the show additional resonance. For one thing, its themes align with increasingly urgent calls for greater inclusiveness and justice in field of per-

"The world is craving intimacy," said Haddad, whose "Hi, Are You Single?" counters the tendency to view people with disabilities as lacking in libido or sex appeal.

forming arts. The stories of people with disabilities must be part of the inclusion, Haddad says. "Disabled people are thriving, and want to be part of all forms of conversation whether it's on a theater stage or in somebody's bedroom and somebody's life."

He also thinks that the isolation imposed by the pandemic

has given "Hi, Are You Single?" additional universality. "The world is craving intimacy," he points out. "The world is craving touch and interaction and kisses and hugs and nudity and pleasure. And these are things that disabled people have been craving for a very long time."

goingoutguide@washpost.com



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