

Adulting and its discontents

The Cleanup deals with the messiness of parenting, romance, and friendship.

by [Kerry Reid](#) October 28, 2022



Lucy Carapetyan and Chad Patterson in *The Cleanup* at Prop Thtr Credit: [Joe Mazza/Brave Lux](#)

Though it's called *The Cleanup*, Hallie Palladino's new play, now in a world premiere with Prop Thtr under Jen Poulin's direction, is all about messiness in the aftermath of the COVID-19 shutdown. Set at a nursery school co-op established by dedicated community mom Julie (Lynnette Li), the play traces the fallout when two of the parent volunteers, Nicole (Lucy Carapetyan) and Logan (Chad Patterson), begin an affair. He's already separated (well, sort of) from his ER doctor wife, and she's been in a loveless marriage with a man whose already low interest in his own kids seems to have turned into outright resentment during stay-at-home. Meantime, Ryan (Brandon Rivera) and his husband are taking their kids to a more upscale day care than the makeshift church basement Julie's been running on financial fumes and holding together with sheer determination. (Alyssa Mohn's set neatly captures the homespun but frayed charms of the day care.)

While the story takes a little while to ramp up dramatically, Palladino shows a deft touch throughout with the small details of parental stress that add up to feeling overwhelmed.

Patterson's Logan, who begins his first conversation with Nicole asking that they talk about "substantive stuff," gives early but subtle warnings of his powers of manipulation. But throughout Palladino's shrewd and sometimes aching portrayal of contemporary parenthood (never easy, and rendered so much harder in the past two years) weaves in the palpable uneasiness all the characters feel as balancing work, kids, and everything else starts to feel like a Jenga game with a body count.

Carapetyan's Nicole doesn't make the best choices, but she makes us understand the aching loneliness driving her decisions. "I am done with 'for now,'" she tells Logan early on. "I'm ready for 'next.'" But what comes next in a world that, as Julie observes, "runs on maternal sacrifice?" Palladino's play reminds us that finding the right answers is crucial for the well-being of kids and parents alike.

The Cleanup

Through 11/19: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; open caption performance Sat 10/29; Athenaeum Center, 2936 N. Southport, athenaeumcenter.org, \$32 (\$10 students and industry)