

Play teaches empathy leads to harmony

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By Kevin Prokosh

★★★★★ (out of five)

AFTER an eight-year hiatus, Dennis Foon returns to the stage as a kinder, gentler playwright with an all-you-need-is-empathy message for tweeners.

Love is a lot to ask for in this not-so-charitable world, so Foon -- who has realistically explored so many of the issues troubling young people over the last 20 years -- settles for asking for more compassion in *Kindness*, which had its premiere Thursday for a student audience at Manitoba Theatre for Young People.



Andrea Scott

Despite the positive promise of the title, Foon's three preteen protagonists

grapple with terrible loss, death, bullying, pathological lying and distressing global events. They first appear in Ms. Feldspar's music class, where they are painfully out of tune with each other, both with and without their instruments.

Tessa, played by Andrea Scott, is uncharacteristically cranky but won't let on that her beloved dog is dying. She is also irate about being hit on by the self-described chick magnet Damon (Daniel Briere), who is trying to impress her with boasts about all his expensive electronic toys. Trying to keep up is geeky Keegan (Tom Keenan), who is being intimidated and pummeled by a schoolyard thug.

The Vancouver-based Foon has attracted an A-list creative team headed by Toronto director Richard Greenblatt, who co-wrote and performed the international hit *2 Pianos, 4 Hands*. With local filmmaker Deco Dawson, he has created a very clever storytelling style that revolves around a giant video screen and two video cameras that dominate Leanne Foley's versatile set.

Scene changes are as easy as training the camera on a miniature reproduction of a room stowed in a line of lockers. The actors perform in front of the screen, interact with what's on it and appear behind it in shadow. The technology works best when it strives for simplicity, such as portraying the bully as a two-metre-high fist that dwarfs the overmatched Keegan.

The cast fares well in mixing character work with tricky video tasks that look easier than they probably are during the highly theatrical 50-minute drama targeted at eight- to 13-year-olds.

Tessa and the boys eventually find common ground -- the love of pets -- and overcome their grief by agreeing to raise money for animals abandoned during the flooding in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. They learn that with empathy they can change their world. Back in Ms. Feldspar's class, the trio's discordant sound is gone and together they now make sweet music.