

THEATER REVIEW

The delicious viciousness of 'God of Carnage'

By Joanne Engelhardt

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Watching the quartet of sublimely talented actors play bait and switch with each other in the current Actors Theatre production of Yasmina Reza's "God of Carnage" is a lot like hearing about another Donald Trump faux pas: It's not very kindhearted, but it's voyeuristically gripping.

Reza's 2009 Tony-winning black comedy has a twist of viciousness that's not easy to pull off. At times it's hilarious, then becomes unpleasant and uncomfortable a second or two later. But it's certainly a tour de force for director Wilma Marcus Chandler, her flawless actors and an attractively decorated set designed by Chandler.

Oh, it starts out innocently enough. Two attractive, upscale New York couples meet to discuss an incident between their 11-year-old sons. One has lost his two front teeth when he was hit with a stick by the other. Though everything seems amicable, by the end of the 90-minute play (done without an intermission), all four are somewhat tipsy and are verbally and physically attacking each other. Think of it as "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"-lite and (with a whole lot more humor).

Michael and Veronica (a likeable Erik Gandolfi and a devastatingly mercurial Ruth Elliott) are parents of Henry, the boy on the receiving end of the stick, while Alan and Annette (business-like Avondina Wills and anxious-to-please MarNae Taylor) are Benjamin's (the other boy's) parents.

At first "Ronnie" makes an effort to be accommodating. She even agrees to change the word "armed" to some-

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thing less strident when Annette objects to her written statement that her son was "armed with a stick." But it doesn't take long for Veronica's spitefulness to trickle in. To the rescue comes affable Michael who staves off a confrontation by offering coffee and some of his wife's homemade clafoutis, a traditional puffed French cake. Ronnie serves it with visible pride, and modestly reveals that her secret ingredient is adding gingerbread crumbs. (It's a clever ploy to include Veronica's clafoutis recipe in the program.)

Still, Ronnie can't seem to stop rubbing in a little salt with her otherwise cordial comments. Elliott is a marvel in this role, showing occasional vulnerability but more often a rich mix of haughtiness, self-righteousness and a real potty mouth when she lets down her guard.

Wills is hysterical as the self-important lawyer who likely answers at least 20-plus phone calls during the course of the play. A too-busy father and husband, he willingly acknowledges that his son is a savage and pays little attention to his tense wife - even when she's upchucking for no apparent reason. (The first time Annette throws up, a lot lands on some of Veronica's prized rare books which causes her to become apoplectic.)

That scene alone is worth the price of admission because it's then that all four of the principals shed what little civility they previously kept in check and let their primal natures take over. It's now every man and woman for him and herself as the meeting degenerates into senseless name-calling, irrational arguments and downright mean behavior. Suddenly Veronica begins whacking away at her husband -- which gives an indication of just how far things have deteriorated.

Ronnie not only rants against her husband, but

'GOD OF CARNAGE'**Presented by:** Actors Theatre**When:** Fridays through Sundays through Oct. 23**Where:** Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz**Tickets:** \$25 general; \$22 senior/student**Details:** www.brownpapertickets.com

also the other couple, their son, the universe and probably everything in between. At this point ailing Annette decides she needs a drink, so Michael pours her some of his prized rum (which the two men have already bonded over), and, by midday, all four proceed to get slightly smashed.

This may not sound like the kind of story of which comedies are made, but, surprisingly, it works here. The whole thing builds up to an improbable - and entertaining -- conclusion, leaving the audience with nothing to do but applaud loudly and recognize that they have witnessed a phenomenal production. (The audience at Friday night's opening performance, in fact, offered up a near-unanimous standing O.)

Director Chandler artfully keeps the action (and the actors) moving at lightning speed and with an even mixture of slapstick and seriousness. Carina Swanberg's lighting design lights the stage beautifully, and Bonnie Ronzio does yeoman's duty as the producer and stage manager as well as operating the sound and light board. While waiting for the play to start, check out the enormous nouveau art mural on the back wall. It was created by the cast and crew of "Carnage" (and it's quite attractive).

A couple more things to pay close attention to: Two vases of elegant red and yellow tulips play a key role in this production as does a wayward hamster. You'll have to see the play to figure out how.



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