

REVIEW

Fun Watching Havoc Unfold in Rep's 'God of Carnage'

By: Evans Donnell, *ArtNowNashville.com*

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"Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time, it weakens you and undermines you." That line from *God of Carnage* might serve as mantra for Yasmina Reza's darkly comic play about manners undone.

Uttering such words in Tennessee Repertory Theatre's sparkling production are four superb actors – David Alford, Shannon Hoppe, Shelean Newman and Jeff Boyet – now tearing with appropriate savagery into each other's characters at Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Johnson Theater. You've probably seen these four gracing local stages before, but I promise you've never seen them like this.

The 2006 play took place in Paris during its award-winning runs there and in London before the setting was moved to New York when it became a Tony Award-winning success on Broadway in 2009. The play, translated into English by Christopher Hampton (*Dangerous Liaisons*), also inspired *Carnage*, a 2011 film starring Christoph Waltz, Kate Winslet, Jodie Foster and John C. Reilly. That film – which opened in Nashville in January – was scripted by Reza and Roman Polanski, the movie's director, and excepting minor changes it was quite faithful to the play.

Michael and Veronica Novak (Boyet and Newman) have invited Alan and Annette Raleigh (Alford and Hoppe) over to their home for discussion and some apple-pear clafouti (a dessert with origins in the Limousin region of France for those unfamiliar with the stuff). Alan and Annette's 11-year-old son has used some wood to knock out two teeth belonging to Michael and Veronica's boy during a confrontation in a nearby park.

What to do? Well, that becomes a rather sticky – and witheringly witty – conversation where the adults act more childish than their kids.

This show, like *Art*, Reza's 1994 rapier thrust to minimalist art, has sharp, crackling dialogue and funny situations that can't be played as such – we get to see the hilarity and irony but the often shattered characters don't. Director René D. Copeland has cast actors who handle the challenges in this 90-minute piece with great craft.

I don't want to give away moments in this play that will spoil it for those who haven't seen it or the film version. I will say that as with virtually all plays tone, timing and reaction play critical roles in the four performers' strong characterizations.

The largest laugh opening night, for instance, came following a telling line spoken by Boyet that was made tremendously funny by his tone and timing along with his colleagues' reaction to it. Yes, if it's not on the page, it won't be on the stage, but Reza's script only goes so far – to keep this show humming actors have to find ways to believably utter her lines while filling in the blanks between them as deliciously as this foursome does.

Gary C. Hoff's living room set (for glimpses at that set see the Tennessee Rep trailer posted at <http://youtu.be/HdxjrmFkws>) has a retro mod flavor I really like. I believe that Veronica and Michael would have a place like this – they want the world to think they're much more hip than they really are.

The costume, lighting and sound design triumvirate of Trish Clark, Phillip Franck and Paul Carrol Binkley provide their usual fine touches. High-quality production values have long been a hallmark of Tennessee Rep, and it's a credit to their veteran staff that show after show those framing elements have been consistently superlative.

Last month when I reviewed *Carnage* I wrote Reza's tale is "about what can happen when we lose the masks we typically wear with others." This *God of Carnage* wrecks havoc on its characters as those masks slip away, but in the talented hands of four gifted actors you'll have a very enjoyable time watching that havoc unfold.

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's presentation of Yazmina Reza's God of Carnage continues through Feb. 18 at Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Johnson Theater (505 Deaderick St.). This play contains mature themes and language. Shows are at 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays and 7:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Matinees are scheduled for 2:30 p.m. Feb. 11 and Feb. 18. Tickets (\$42.50 regular admission) are available through the TPAC box office downtown, by calling 615-782-4040 or visiting www.tennesseeep.org.