

REVIEW

BWW Reviews: Tennessee Rep Lays Waste To The Urban Landscape With GOD OF CARNAGE

By: Jeffrey Ellis, *broadwayworld.com*

February 5, 2012

[Yasmina Reza's](#) *God of Carnage* might well be the most popular contemporary play among American regional theaters at the moment—apparently, according to a recent NPR report, it's playing everywhere—and Rene Copeland, producing artistic director of Tennessee Repertory Theatre, has brought it to TPAC's [Andrew Johnson Theatre](#) in a wonderfully acted production that eviscerates modern manners and mores with stealthy precision and a focused resolve.

Starring a quartet of fine Nashville actors—[Shelean Newman](#), [Jeff Boyet](#) and Shannon Hoppe welcome [David Alford](#) back to Tennessee Rep's stage to complete their not-so-genial foursome—Reza's darkly comic script comes to life with seemingly effortless ease, thanks to Copeland's direction, the aforementioned cadre of actors and the playwright's razor sharp dialogue.

Taking place on a [Gary Hoff](#)-designed set that depicts an elegant New York City loft (which seems to spring magically from the pages of *Architectural Digest*—contemporary designer furniture, an expansive cocktail table strewn with expensive art books, a vase full of multi-colored tulips, shiny hardwood floors and the ubiquitous square, black leather ottoman all intact) which is beautifully lit by Phillip Franck, audience members are lulled into thinking the comedy of manners they are about to witness is rather genteel, if archly upper class, only to find those misguided beliefs (some audience members seem content to rely solely upon press releases to inform them of what's to come) rather quickly upended.

Reza spares no time in laying waste to the urban landscape in which well-heeled American parents meet to discuss a playground altercation between their two sons, which has resulted in one boy brandishing a stick to knock out two of the other boy's teeth. While the parents are together, ostensibly, to reach an understanding of what transpired on the playground and to agree upon a plan to handle the situation, the meeting quickly devolves into expletive-laced chaos.

Copeland's cast approach their roles with zealous glee, relishing the opportunity to dig into an exquisitely rendered contemporary comedy and, in the process, they deliver performances that are so shockingly real that they are, momentarily at least, off-putting. In the hands of lesser actors, the roles could easily become cartoonish, filled with buffoonery and theatricality. But with Copeland's always steady, sure-handed direction (she really is one of the region's best, as she proves time and again) of four very capable actors, Reza's script resonates deeply with the audience, ensuring a production that is completely accessible, believable and characters who are, quite frankly, easily recognizable.

Newman and Boyet are perfect together as the hosts (parents of the toothless boy and owners of that stunning loft), playing off each other with confidence and palpable self-assurance.

Newman displays a fiery quality that's deliciously vile and quite unlike herself (or so we've been come to believe, thanks to her previous Tennessee Rep triumphs as Cinderella and Maria Von Trapp), and as she rails against the injustices of the world while challenging the other characters for their shortcomings, both real and imagined, she displays a tightly wound countenance that underscores her performance.

Boyet, always likable and agreeable, remains as such even despite his rather reprehensible moments onstage—particularly during his monologue about releasing his nine-year-old daughter's hamster on the mean streets of New York City—which helps to make his character's admission that he's not a liberal and is sick and tired of pretending to be what he's not all the more compelling.

Playing opposite them in this no-holds-barred updating of drawing room comedy are the beautifully paired Hoppe and Alford, as the parents of the kid who, armed with (no scratch that, furnished or perhaps brandishing) a stick he picked up on the playground, either attacked, poked or attempted to assassinate (depending upon one's perspective—a negligible possibility given that none of the parents witnessed the altercation) the other boy.

Hoppe, always elegant and lovely even when she's throwing up all over the tastefully appointed apartment, gives a remarkably nuanced performance, ably handling dramatic histrionics and laugh-out-loud hilarity with equal ease. Clad in [Trish Clark's](#) elegantly tailored black suit, she strikes a stylish figure (Clark's choices for each of the characters is pitch-perfect) of urban sophistication.

Alford, who we may as well admit is beloved among his theater colleagues in these parts, approaches the role of Alan (a high-powered Manhattan lawyer with a cell phone, among other things, vying for his constant attention) with a requisite gleam in his eye, relishing the opportunity to put his estimable talents on display as he commands the stage with his bravura performance.

The four actors play off one another so easily that all disbelief is completely suspended, each of their performances so genuinely crafted that you might feel like the proverbial fly on the wall watching the disintegration of gracious living—and all that modern, upper crust Americans hold holy—during one clafouti-fueled, Kouros-infused afternoon.

- *God of Carnage*. By [Yasmina Reza](#). Directed by Rene D. Copeland. Presented by Tennessee Repertory Theatre at TPAC's [Andrew Johnson](#) Theatre, Nashville. Through February 18. For details, go to www.TennesseeRep.org.