

REVIEW

***God of Carnage* delivers darks humor, raw emotion**

By: **Amy Stumpfl**, *The Tennessean*

February 5, 2012

In this age of reality television, we've grown accustomed to watching bad behavior play out in our living rooms. And while Tennessee Rep's current production of *God of Carnage* — on stage through Feb. 18 — never quite stoops to the level of say, *Toddlers in Tiaras*, there's something deliciously demented about watching so-called civilized adults come unraveled.

Penned by French novelist and playwright Yasmina Reza (and translated by Christopher Hampton), *God of Carnage* won the 2009 Tony Award for best play. The 2011 film adaptation — titled simply *Carnage* — was directed by Roman Polanski and stars Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz and John C. Reilly.

As the play opens we meet the Novaks and the Raleighs — two sophisticated New York couples who have gathered in an attempt to peacefully resolve a playground dispute involving their 11-year-old sons. Veronica Novak is a self-righteous art historian, while husband Michael is a likable, self-proclaimed "Neanderthal." Meanwhile, Alan Raleigh is a high-powered lawyer, whose wife Annette works in "wealth management."

It all starts out friendly enough, with the grown-ups making small talk over espresso and dessert. But there are signs of friction as Alan takes a seemingly endless stream of business calls and Veronica peppers the conversation with passive-aggressive remarks. Add a 10-year-old bottle of rum and a particularly messy interlude involving Veronica's beloved art books, and the evening quickly deteriorates into a nasty war of words that is far more disturbing than the original playground incident.

Director René D. Copeland provides a keen eye and sure hand over this scathingly dark comedy. But she also has gathered an extremely skilled ensemble to help peel back the layers of these self-important sophisticates.

David Alford is absolutely believable as the cynical Alan, a modern-day barbarian who arms himself with sarcasm and a cellphone. Shannon Hoppe is equally effective as Annette, the very definition of pent-up frustration. Jeff Boyet is perfectly cast as Michael, garnering some of the evening's biggest laughs as he tries to navigate the slippery slope on which he finds himself. And Shelean Newman manages to balance both the hypocrisy and humanity of smug Veronica.

As things escalate, the play takes on an almost farcical quality, teetering on the brink of believability. But the characters are grounded enough to keep it from going over the edge, and there are some brilliant exchanges — and some surprising alliances — to be enjoyed.

Trish Clark's costumes do a fine job of establishing the characters, while Gary C. Hoff's remarkable set and Phillip Franck's subtle lighting create an elegant gallery in which to observe this entertaining exhibit of raw human emotion.

Like it or not, we find that there's something all too familiar about these characters. And no matter how hard we try to maintain the fragile facade of civility, *God of Carnage* reminds us that we never fully escape our primal instincts.