

Magic Theatre's 'Evie's Waltz' ratchets up suburban tension

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As a parent, it is difficult to watch "Evie's Waltz," the new Carter W. Lewis drama that opened over the weekend in San Francisco's Magic Theatre. But even those who haven't run the parental gantlet would probably find it tough to watch the play.

Yet it would be impossible not to watch this absolutely riveting look at modern, albeit highly dysfunctional, family life. It is a compelling and engaging story, and a tale with no heroes — in fact, for one reason or another, you find yourself violently disliking each of the characters, both the ones you see and the ones you only hear about.

The action takes place on the backyard deck of what you reasonably assume is an upscale suburban home, nestled below a tree-studded hillside, where families can peacefully and happily enjoy the fruits of their labors, from lite beer to a deluxe stainless steel barbecue outfit.

That's what papa Clay (Darren Bridgett) is using to cook up a mess of vegetarian kabobs for the missus, Gloria (Julia Brothers), and the mother of their son's girlfriend Evie.

They're going to calmly chat about how their son and Evie were suspended from school for bringing a gun onto campus. Clay is ready to be a buddy, talk things out and forgive the boy, while Gloria wants to strangle him and vows she will never again recognize him as her son.

Things begin to unravel when Evie (Marielle Heller), rather than her mom, shows up for the barbecue. Evie tells Clay and

Gloria her mom got drunk. Again. And when she takes her jacket off, Clay notices some blood on her shoulder. She tells him her mother broke a plate and cut herself and that's how she was bloodied.

Then all hell breaks loose in so many different ways, and what was supposed to be a friendly barbecue turns into a nightmarish mess that will leave all of those involved scarred and damaged for the rest of their lives. It becomes a horrific cat-and-mouse game that keeps the audience both guessing and disturbingly confused right up until the end.

The Magic's new artistic director, Loretta Greco, makes her directorial debut with the company and does a wonderful job of ratcheting up the tension and using Lewis' sparkling and precise dialogue to its fullest impact.

And that is helped in no small part by the actors, who play this one at the top of their game, creating characters that, while not likable, are certainly forceful and impossible to ignore.

This is also a show where the set, by Erik Flatmo, adds much to the storytelling, and the sound design by Sara Huddleston becomes an important part of increasing the tension of the piece.