

Pacific Repertory Theatre Production Review

PacRep's Evie's Waltz a chilling reflection of our times!

By Barbara Rose Shuler

June 12, 2014

CARMEL >> It's a weeping, hideous pity this play is relevant in our era.

But here we are living in a country of such shameful violence that Carter W. Lewis' "Evie's Waltz" appears on stages throughout the land holding up an artistic mirror to this disgrace.

Pacific Repertory Theatre begins its summer season with this short three-person production at Carmel's Circle Theatre. Directed by Kenneth Kelleher, the production features engaging actors Jackson Davis, Julie Hughett and Bri Slama.

Though he has not penned a work of Aristotelian-level tragic brilliance, Lewis' script transmits a dark, succinct message about our society. That our culture has earned this ugly reflection is sickening. And Kelleher, by choosing "Evie's Waltz," asks us to contemplate what we have become.

Why, as a society, can we not install national laws to keep guns from easily being purchased by mentally disturbed people who will kill with them? When will we elect representatives whose votes cannot be bought to support agendas of gun manufacturers? How did we fall so far from our ideals as a democratic nation that we are losing our collective soul to the crazy notion that measured control of deadly weapons is not an urgent necessity?

Doesn't this seem to you like a form of insanity?

Meet Clay and Gloria Matthews, habituated to the quarrelsome banter of the unhappily married. They bicker about their 16-year-old son Danny, who has disappointed them, as they prepare a kebab-grill patio lunch for a neighbor who is involved with the matter in question. The neighbor's daughter Evie, dressed in camouflage pants, appears mid-squabble, an aggressively disdainful teen who is in love with their son. She alleges that her mom is drunk and won't be coming over after all.

The threat level ratchets up when we learn from Evie that Danny is aiming a gun at the three of them off stage, while blocking out incoming sound by listening to Strauss waltzes. Evie can communicate with him by texting.

The Matthews continue their irritable conversation as Evie reveals increasingly alarming details about what is occurring. The parents' willingness to go on with their bickering and barbecuing knowing their disturbed son holds them in his scope eerily echoes the way our culture seems to normalize gun killings. Evie's disclosures drive the plot to its chilling conclusion.

Lewis possesses a sharp ear for dialogue. The habituated arguments between Gloria and Clay and the awkward exchanges with Evie mark the stark differences in the generations. None of the individuals in the play comes across as a sympathetic character. We remain in an uncomfortable pressure cooker of dysfunction with this trio preparing for an explosive outcome.

Kelleher directs a taut, tension-filled show with well-executed special effects. Hughett and Davis as Gloria and Clay deliver their dialogue with caustic intonation relieved only by Clay's forced upbeat comments. It's almost too much, like caricatures. Some glimmers of what brought them together in happier days would add welcome texture to the exchanges between them. However, the actors convey well the many shades of denial these characters represent.

Slama brings a dangerous edginess to her portrayal of Evie, a renegade with deep psychological problems. She's the person behind the headlines letting us into mindsets that lead to senseless slaughter. Whether or not Lewis' portrait is a psychologically realistic one, Evie sends a message about a society that fails young people at home and in schools.

Patrick McEvoy's bright, Southwestern-style set presents a blood-red wall with an orange door upstage and a nicely fashioned patio rimmed by river rock downstage. A tidy scene for a chaotic story.

Costumer Ziona Goren defines the generational contrast in Evie's military garb and the familiar casual clothes of a middle class couple. Joanna Hobbs' lighting effects punctuate the tension of the show with occasional images of a gun sight flickering across the stage.

"Evie's Waltz" takes some unexpected turns as a good thriller must, but it doesn't waver from its dark reflection of a culture in trouble.

EVIE'S WALTZ >> Pacific Repertory Theatre. 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through June 28. Golden Bough Playhouse's Circle Theatre, Casanova Street between Eighth and Ninth avenues, Carmel. \$20-\$35. www.pacrep.org.