

Broken families, teen violence dance through 'Evie's Waltz'



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by Chad Jones, [S.F. Theater Examiner](#)



Marielle Heller (center) is the title character in the Magic Theatre's taut thriller "Evie's Waltz," which also stars Darren Bridgett, seen in rear. Photo by www.davidallenstudio.com

[Carter W. Lewis'](#) "Evie's Waltz," now at San Francisco's [Magic Theatre](#), is a tense, frightening thriller that dredges up provocative issues about life in 21st-century America.

The fact that the 90-minute play is so uncomfortable – I can't remember sweating so much during a play, and it wasn't the unseasonably warm weather – is a testament to how well the show is produced.

Magic artistic director [Loretta Greco](#), in her first directorial outing since joining the theater, has cast the show brilliantly and guides her trio of actors through Lewis' taut, fraught examination of guns, teens and the detonation of the nuclear family.

Erik Flatmo created the patio set on which the play takes place, and from what we can see, this is a gorgeous suburban home surrounded by woods and upper-middle-class affluence. We can only peek into the house itself, but we can tell it is well appointed in every way, as are its inhabitants, Clay (Darren Bridgett) and Gloria (Julia Brothers), who dress nicely even for an informal early autumn barbecue on the deck (costumes are by Fumiko Bielefeldt).

York Kennedy's lighting design takes on extra importance in Lewis' story. The warm, inviting early evening light gives way to looming night in the real time of the play, and the darkness is significant in many ways. Kennedy's lighting design (with assistance from Sara Huddleston's Strauss-infused sound design) also has some chilling, highly theatrical surprises that remind us just what's at stake here.

What begins as another white suburban angst drama – Clay and Gloria's 16-year-old son, Danny, was suspended that morning for bringing a gun to school – turns into a mystery and then an outright thriller.

Clay emerges as the bleeding heart of the family. As he skewers vegetables and brushes them with his soy-citrus marinade, he defends Danny, while Gloria, sipping from her gin and tonic, declares that the boy upstairs in his room is no longer her son. "I want to smother him in his sleep," she declares.

Then Evie (Marielle Heller), daughter of a hard-drinking single mother in the neighborhood and Danny's girlfriend, arrives. "Mom's drunk, so I came instead," Evie says, just before Gloria and Clay notice the blood on her shoulder.

The tension ratchets up from there as deceptions and plans are revealed, and ghosts of Columbine and random acts of teen violence flood the stage.

Who's to blame for teen violence? Is it the parents or the parents of the parents? And can a parent really stop loving a child? Lewis doesn't have any answers, but he creates interesting questions. He shades his female characters beautifully – both Gloria and Evie are far more complex than they first seem – but he doesn't let Clay develop much beyond the big-hearted, caretaker he appears to be.

That said, the performances are outstanding. Brothers brings incredible depth to Gloria, a smart, mean woman whose plan to be an incredible mother didn't quite pan out. There's bitterness and tenderness in her, and it's an extraordinary thing to watch her succumb to the power of the teenagers she loathes.

Bridgett takes Clay to a powerful emotional level even as the character attempts to put a positive spin on a situation that couldn't possibly end well. His capacity for denial is immense, but so is his need to be a good father.

Heller has the hardest of the three roles because playing a loose canon 16-year-old and making the audience care about her is a tall order. Heller does it but never without letting us forget that, **even with her** considerable brains and bruised humanity, Evie is someone we need to fear.