

Magic Theatre San Francisco Production Reviews

Theater review: 'Evie's Waltz'

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Evie's Waltz: Drama. By Carter W. Lewis. Directed by Loretta Greco. With Julia Brothers, Marielle Heller and Darren Bridgett. (Through Dec. 7. Magic Theatre, Building D, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco. 75 minutes. Tickets \$15-\$45. Call (415) 441-8822 or go to www.magictheatre.org).

If nothing concentrates one's attention quite so much as having a gun pointed at your head, almost the same can be said for observing actors onstage through the scope of a hunting rifle. The special effects may be far less realistic than those in the average movie, but the impact is twice as chilling as the crosshairs in designer York Kennedy's spotlight settle on one living, undeniably present actor after another in "Evie's Waltz" at the Magic Theatre.

The tensions beneath a casual family barbecue rise by gripping degrees in Carter W. Lewis' new play. Loretta Greco, in her directorial debut as the Magic's artistic director, orchestrates a seamless escalation from a couple's disagreement over how to deal with their son's suspension for bringing a gun to school, to a life-threatening standoff with his girlfriend. The familiar strains of Johann Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz" have never sounded more ominous than in Lewis' portrait of fear-laden life in post-Columbine, post-9/11 America.

It helps to have three actors who can fully inhabit the welter of emotions beneath Lewis' smart, sardonic humor. Julia Brothers, Marielle Heller and Darren Bridgett fill the bill admirably in the West Coast premiere that opened Saturday (within weeks of the play's first production at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis). "Waltz" has its flaws and may not bear too much reflection after leaving the theater, but Greco and the actors keep you from noticing as this slice of American life spirals to its ambiguous conclusion.

Brothers compels attention without seeming to ask for it, merely by depicting the subtle contradictions of her middle-aged Gloria with careful realism. Her restless gaze and the biting sarcasm of her impatient rejoinders betray an ingrained personal and marital dissatisfaction that rests uneasily but naturally beside the comfort she clearly takes from the predictability of Bridgett's doggedly chipper positive thinking as her husband, Clay.

Lewis sets the scene in quick, telling strokes as Clay prepares to

barbecue while he and Gloria bicker over how to respond to their son Danny's suspension. Erik Flatmo's backyard deck set enhances the domestic tensions with its glimpse of a comfortable middle-class interior and backdrop of barren treetops. Clay and Gloria are awaiting the arrival of the mother of Danny's girlfriend, Evie, who's been suspended with him. When Evie (Heller) shows up in her place, her tough-kid demeanor and teen-chic camouflage pants (apt costumes by Fumiko Bielefeldt) signal that the situation is more problematic than they've anticipated.

Discomfort, forced cordiality and adolescent impatience lead to scary and revealing exchanges as the confrontation plays out in cagey, unexpected turns. Lewis displays the complexities of contemporary teen life, buffeted by intense passions, intellectual hunger, bullying, the pervasive fear of school shootings and the competing influences of "Romeo and Juliet," pop culture and Strauss. The exchanges between Heller and Brothers are particularly bracing, and Heller's meaningful glances bring the unseen - but always present - Danny eerily to life.

Lewis hasn't developed Clay's character nearly as well. Compared to the shadings and ambiguities that enliven Gloria and Evie, Clay's relentless positive thinking begins to seem increasingly one-dimensional. In retrospect, there are plot details that don't quite add up or cry out for further exploration as well.

But there's a great deal in Lewis' drama with which many teens and any parent who's experienced guilt or doubt - which is most of us - will identify. And Greco and her cast execute his "Waltz" with smooth, flowing vitality and gripping grace.