

St. Louis Repertory Theatre

Dancing in the Dark

Evie's Waltz delivers a stunning punch to the gut

By Paul Friswold

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How does a playwright know when he has a success on his hands? One sure indicator is when an individual calls the local paper the morning after the preview performance to talk with someone else who has seen it. And if that caller feels that there are three "huge problems" with the story, and the other person feels that this particular play is remarkably devoid of error — is in fact, so emphatically accurate in its depiction of the rather new era of armed teenagers and their beleaguered parents — well, so much the better. Intelligent conversations between absolute strangers are the hallmark of an excellent play.

Carter W. Lewis' *Evie's Waltz*, staged by the Rep Studio and directed by Andrea Urice, is an excellent play.

There are several points in this smart and taut drama that require the element of surprise for full impact — certain moments occur that destroy your initial perception of the three characters' motives. Each of these instants comes as a short, sharp explosion that detonates somewhere between stomach and heart. But the basics of the play are that the never-seen Danny, teenage son of Clay (Ted Deasy) and Gloria (Annie Fitzpatrick), has been suspended for bringing a gun to school. His girlfriend Evie (Magan Wiles) is involved as well, and it is this sharp-tongued terror who arrives at Clay and Gloria's suburban back yard to discuss her and Danny's punishment in place of her mother, who is "too drunk to make it."

And so the three discuss punishment. Oh boy, do they discuss punishment.

Clay, as his name implies, is malleable on the topic. Danny's behaved badly, but he's essentially good, goes Clay's reasoning. Deasy hews so closely to the line dividing "wishy-washy Danny apologist" from "compassionate father who can't understand what has happened to the little boy he loves" that Clay eventually becomes occluded by waves of confusion. There's nothing left of him but fear and doubt, a sad-eyed presence hoping for the best while expecting the worst.

Gloria is more sharply limned. Angry to the point of being dismissive to her husband, to Evie, and even to her son, Gloria expects nothing anymore: She's adamant that where Danny is involved, the only outcome possible is the worst. But she's no cardboard bitch, no wire mother symbolizing neglect; Gloria's crackling anger flares outwardly only once and is swiftly retracted, and it's then you realize her rage is self-directed all other times. Fitzpatrick has buried Gloria's shattered heart deeply, but not entirely out of sight.

And then there's Evie. Profoundly naive in the manner of teenagers who honestly believe there's a government conspiracy to keep them unhappy, she's also wickedly smart in the manner of teenagers who know when adults are lying and who understand that saying "I love you" is more

important than implying it — and who know further that there are many ways to say it. Evie's initial appearance — compact, self-contained, brash — becomes looser and more wild as we race to the close. A twitching bundle of muscles by her mouth, her right arm flailing as she defends love and honor and the beauty of Danny, Wiles strips away the posturing and the snarling to reveal the overwhelming fear of a child — an older child — not quite sure which way leads out of "the fields of poison," to repurpose a bit of Lewis' poetry.

This is the ultimate truth of *Evie's Waltz*. At the end we know why Danny has a gun, but this knowledge is the least interesting fact gleaned from the play. What matters is that Lewis believably re-creates the secret, superheated world of the teenager, but he also casts light on the darkened bedroom conversations of parents. The point of intersection for both realms is that paralyzing fear — the fear both child and parent work so tirelessly to hide from each other. Why? Now's the time to discuss.