

Tony Award winning 'God of Carnage' at Herberger

Continues run of Yasmina Reza's work

by **Kerry Lengel**

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"There is still such a thing as the art of co-existence, isn't there?" asks well-to-do mom Veronica Novak in "God of Carnage."

Um, not so much.

The latest psychic dissection by French playwright Yasmina Reza, "God of Carnage" won the 2009 Tony Award for best play. In the New York production, James Gandolfini, Marcia Gay Harden, Jeff Daniels and Hope Davis starred as two couples meeting to discuss an altercation between their sons.

To say things do not go well is a gross understatement. This is "The Lord of the Flies" in the living room, 90 minutes of brutally funny dialogue that entertains and horrifies in equal measure as alliances shift from couple vs. couple to women vs. men to a metaphorical spouse swapping.

"Are we really as civilized as we think we are? That's the essential question of the play," says Rick Lombardo, who directs the regional premiere of "God of Carnage" for Arizona Theatre Company.

"How far are we really from cavemen and -women? Reza asks some fundamental questions about our essential nature. She makes it very difficult for the audience to look at the four characters as they behave increasingly badly and just judge them because we see bits and pieces of ourselves in all of those people."

The play opens Saturday at the Herberger Theater Center, a month ahead of the release of a film adaptation, "Carnage," starring Kate Winslet, Jodie Foster and John C. Reilly and directed by Roman Polanski.

We are clearly in the midst of a Yasmina Reza moment, especially here in the Valley, where four of her plays are on the marquee for the 2011-12 season. Theatre Artists Studio began the verbal bloodletting last month with "Life X 3" and follows up with "The Unexpected Man" in February. In March, Southwest Shakespeare makes a rare foray into contemporary drama with "Art," Reza's breakthrough play in the States back in 1998.

That represents half of Reza's stage repertoire. A glamorous if reluctant public figure in France, she has been writing for three decades but divides her time among plays, novels and her first love, acting. She is, indeed, an actor's playwright, which goes a long way toward explaining her popularity.



Tim Fuller/Arizona Theatre Company

A scene from the Arizona Theatre Company production "God of Carnage," playing Nov. 19-Dec. 4, 2011, at Herberger Theater Center in Phoenix. Pictured from left: Bob Sorenson, Joey Parsons and Benjamin Evett.

More on this topic

Arizona Theatre Company: 'God of Carnage'

When: Nov. 19-Dec. 4, with preview performances 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 17, and 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 18.

Where: Herberger Theater Center, 222 E. Monroe St., Phoenix.

Admission: \$32-\$64.

Details: 602-256-6995, arizonatheatre.org.

"It's an actor's dream to be able to work on a Reza play," says Bob Sorenson, a longtime favorite of Phoenix audiences who now works out of New York. He starred in "Art" for Arizona Theatre Company in 2000 and plays Michael Novak (the Gandolfini role) in "God of Carnage."

"Her language is so dynamic," he says. "She never writes middle-of-the-road. She plays with the extremes in both directions, the comedy and the drama. She puts a lot of stuff into a short time, and you have to be able to shift gears -- emotionally, dramatically, comedically -- very fast or it doesn't work."

While Reza has publicly expressed disappointment that her plays are so often labeled comedies, she leaves her work far more open to the interpretation of actors and directors than most playwrights. The script for "God of Carnage," for example, opens with the following guidance about the characters and the staging: "All in their forties. A living room. No realism. Nothing superfluous."

That kind of freedom is what attracted Carol MacLeod, founder of Theatre Artists Studio, to direct "The Unexpected Man."

"I've been an acting teacher for over 45 years, at every level," says MacLeod, who is also the co-founder of Actors Theatre (as well as the wife of former Phoenix Suns coach John MacLeod).

"When I read 'Unexpected Man,' it has no stage directions, no pauses, nothing," she says. "It's two people sitting on a train, and to me, it seemed like an exciting thing, over four or five months with two skilled actors, to really work on the process -- the back story, the intentions, why do you switch from this to this -- because none of that is included. It's kind of a culmination of the things that I teach."

The richness of the dialogue is a trademark of a Reza play and one reason that "Carnage" director Lombardo isn't worried that the film version will put a damper on ticket sales when he mounts the play again for his own theater, the San Jose Rep, next spring.

"Plays created for the stage are driven by language, and sometimes I think that in the translation to film, suddenly the camera's too small for how big and how much language there is, and things have to change quite dramatically to lend themselves to what is essentially an imagistic medium," Lombardo says.

"I'm going to be fascinated to see if this can really work on film because the comic play is so dependent on the ingredient of the live audience to lend its energy to the event, to shape the event.

"I suspect that it will be a wonderful film, but I also suspect that the experience of folks seeing it in a theater with live actors doing these horrible, provocative things is really a completely different type of event and one that the film won't be able to replicate."

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