

One-liners make deep statement

Below farcical surface, 'God of Carnage' has important message

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Thursday, October 20, 2011



ARIZONA THEATRE COMPANY

From left, Benjamin Evett, Joey Parsons, Amy Resnick and Bob Sorenson in Arizona Theatre Company's "God of Carnage," which is thick with one-liners and ridiculous situations.

Rick Lombardo can't wait to get to work every day.

He is directing Arizona Theatre Company's "God of Carnage," which opens next week.

And it is pure joy for him.

"We laugh so hard sometimes it hurts," says Lombardo, the artistic director of San Jose Repertory Theatre, which is co-producing the Yasmina Reza play with ATC.

That much laughing is hard to imagine for a play with both god and carnage in the title.

But Reza has written a comedy that many have defined as farce (though Lombardo is not among them) and is thick with quick one-liners, ridiculous situations, and some important things to say.

"It's a play that's hard to categorize," says Lombardo, speaking by phone before rehearsal last week.

"There are farcical moments, but it goes beyond what I would term the limits of farce. It's a drama, farce, self-commentary, it's a fine characterization, and it is hilariously funny."

But wade through that laughter, and Reza has some incisive social commentary.

The playwright has, as she did in "Art" (which ATC staged in 2000), fashioned a story with sophisticated, urbane, well-to-do characters.

"There is this world where there is this notion that we are civilized, stable, that there are institutions we can depend on," says Lombardo of "God of Carnage."

"A lot of that is actually a lie. A lot of things in terms of civilization are crumbling around us. This civilization veneer is very very thin, and this play shows us how thin. It shows us how easy it is to tip us over into horrible, despicable behavior."

The story revolves around two couples who get together to discuss what to do about their children - one couple's son hit the other's with a stick and knocked out a few teeth.

They are very well behaved, at first. But as their time together progresses, any sense of decorum flies out the window.

"She writes about people that seem to have reached a certain level of sophistication, comfort, that have evolved," says Lombardo.

"They should be self-aware, wise. But what she does is reveal that the emperor has no clothes. These urbane, civilized people are actually none of the above. She pulls away the curtain - the illusions and trappings of success actually mask the fact that all of us, in her view, are still kind of beasts. We are still animals, no matter how we want to tell ourselves we are civilized and sophisticated."

"God of Carnage" first premiered in 2006 in Zurich; moved on to France in 2008; and in 2009, Christopher Hampton translated it to English (Reza writes in French) and it opened in London's West End. It opened on Broadway in 2009, quickly caught fire, won a Tony for Best Play, and the limited run was extended. Then extended again.

"She writes plays we all recognize ourselves in," says ATC's Artistic Director David Ira Goldstein in explaining why it was selected for the season.

"We all face the situation of how we deal with conflict resolution within a relationship or with others. (Reza) finds these wonderful pressure-cooker situations in 'God of Carnage.' It has depth and perception, and is also hilarious."

Lombardo agrees.

"It's a wild roller coaster of an experience watching these four characters devolve in front of our eyes," he says.

"The theater experience is one of an incredible 90 minute thrill ride. The beauty of the play is it takes us beyond that and presents us with these other themes and ideas that we have to confront ... and it's all packaged in this brilliant comic machine."

"The goal is that people laugh, laugh, laugh, until they have a moment of complete horror," adds Lombardo.

"If we do that, we will have done the play justice."

If you go

- What: "God of Carnage."
- Presented by: Arizona Theatre Company.
- Playwright: Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton.
- Director: Rick Lombardo.
- Where: Temple of Music and Art, 330 S. Scott Ave.
- When: Previews are 8 p.m. Saturday; 7 p.m. Sunday; 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through next Thursday. Opening is 7:30 p.m. Oct. 28. Continues through Nov. 12.
- Tickets: \$31-\$56.
- Reservations/information: 622-2823.
- Running time: 90 minutes, with no intermission.

• Cast: Bob Sorenson, Amy Resnick, Benjamin Evett and Joey Parsons.