

Stage Mom

By Lynn Trimble

Neanderthals making nice?

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Cast of Arizona Theatre Company production of *God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza

There's a point in the play "God of Carnage" where things take a decided turn, but making it that far into the [Arizona Theatre Company](#) production, which I saw on opening night, took some doing. I found myself thinking, "I can't take any more of these plays about people whining on pristine sofas."

Soon slurs, swearing and something best left unnamed before the uninitiated start spewing forth — and the story develops at a quickening pace. Still, theater aficionado Alan Handelsman, who was part of the first class of [ASU Gammage Goer](#) reviewers, felt "there was something missing" in the opening night performance.

Handelsman and his wife Anita saw the play a couple of years ago in [New York City](#), and he's got a clear preference for the NYC version's vibe — feeling it had more "energy, commitment, rhythm, flow, surprise, pacing, abandon, arc and continuity." Even simple prop choices, he recalls, gave the NYC production "a much greater sense of impending danger."

The [Arizona Theatre Company](#) production was good, says Handelsman, but not great. Despite being surrounded at the [Herberger Theater Center](#) by people laughing loud and proud, I'm afraid I have to concur. "God of Carnage" felt a bit of a letdown — perhaps because I went into it expecting so much. "God of Carnage" won the 2009 Tony Award for best play.

Other people whose opinions I respect felt differently. I saw [Frances Smith Cohen](#), artistic director for [Center Dance Ensemble](#), and her daughter Rachel Cohen in the theater foyer after the show, and both praised its artistry. Rachel loved “the writing and directing” and Frances “the contrast in characters.” My own theater baby Lizabeth, who has studied dance with both, would likely take their side.

We talked via “Skype” after I got home from the theater Saturday night, and Lizabeth was shocked when I shared my tepid response to the show. She saw “God of Carnage” in Chicago last year while touring colleges with my husband James. Both remember it being fabulously funny.

Lizabeth described it as “well written and well acted” — and shared that she loved watching the different characters evolve during the course of the story. Seems she was amused by just how “quickly the adults became the children.”

“God of Carnage” centers on two couples’ attempts at a civilized conversation after their sons spar on a playground. “You just don’t expect it to go as far as it does,” reflects Lizabeth. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen dad laugh that much,” she recalls. “He totally let loose.”

“Maybe.” she says, “it was his way of letting off steam after all the things that happened when we were little.” Seems she’s observed that the things we sometimes took too much to heart as young parents now fall into more perspective. “You used to take it all so seriously,” she told me. “You guys have learned to let go since then.”

The journey from kindergarden to college does effect profound changes. But the parents in “God of Carnage” have survived only grade school, and the perils of middle school are proving a bit more daunting. After meeting to discuss one boy’s use of a stick and another’s missing teeth, they demonstrate that words are perhaps the worst weapons of all.

The parents who seem so perfectly civilized to begin with soon dissolve into shrieking narcissism and nihilism, something that feels more believable once alcohol enters the picture. I hate to think any of us could trade “nice” for “Neanderthal” so quickly in its absence.

[Handelsman](#), a highly-trained hypnotherapist, says the play reveals “how many different layers humans live in” — showing “the difference between the person we show, and the person we are, and the person we may be afraid we are.” Confronted with the final image in this production, we realize that humans haven’t evolved nearly as far as they imagine.

– Lynn

Note: This original production, directed by Rick Lombardo, is a co-production of Arizona Theatre Company and [San Jose Repertory Theatre](#) (which performs it next spring). Yasmina Reza has teamed with Roman Polanski to write the screenplay for a movie titled “Carnage,” directed by Polanski and scheduled for mid-December release. It stars Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz and John C. Reilly. [Click here](#) to learn about another opportunity to see the play performed live. *Please note that “God of Carnage” contains “mature content.”*

Coming up: Advice for young filmmakers, Handelsman shares his “Wicked” ways, Holiday shopping “arts and culture” style, The fine “Art” of Yasmina Reza

Photos: Tim Fuller for Arizona Theatre Company



Clockwise: Joey Parsons, Bob Sorenson, Amy Resnick and Benjamin Evett in the ATC production of God of Carnage