

Arizona Theatre Company & Beowulf Alley Theatre

'Lear' and 'God of Carnage' - worthy plays are complete opposites But which one is better?

By Dave Irwin

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Two plays open. One is a comedy; the other a tragedy. One features a big production company putting on a little play. The other is a little production company putting on a big play. If you have to pick one, which should you see?

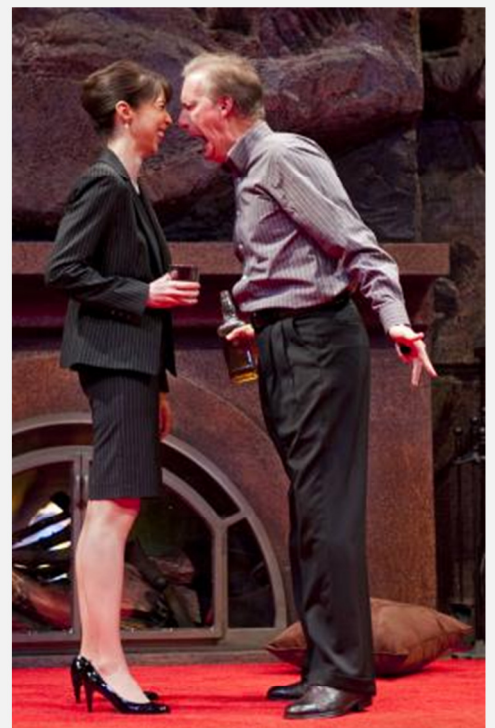
It's a trick question because both of these works, "God of Carnage" at Arizona Theatre Company and "Lear" at Beowulf Alley Theatre Company, are worth attending, though for very different reasons.

"God of Carnage," is a well-made farce that posits two couples trying to sort out a fight that has occurred between their respective 11-year-old sons. The civil discussion soon degenerates into a comedy of accusations, recriminations, and name calling. Then things spiral out of control. With some heavy drinking, the story becomes a goofy comedic vamp on "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?" without the psychological seriousness. Finally, exposition is left behind as the scenes devolve to slapstick in a madcap race to the curtain.

"Lear" is an abridged version of "King Lear," Shakespeare's complex tragedy of family and loyalty. It takes a certain amount of ego/hubris/cajones to edit Shakespeare, but only purists will object to director Michael Fenlason's thoughtful adaptation. Though he cuts a number of lines and several characters, Fenlason retains the language of the original text, including its blank verse cadence. He discards the King of France and the dukes of Albany, Cornwall and Burgundy, as well as their political machinations. However, he retains the important subplot of intrigue involving the Earl of Gloucester and his legitimate and illegitimate sons, which mirrors old Lear's own travails with his daughters.

Arizona Theatre Company brings considerable resources in production values and acting talent to bear on its four-character drawing room comedy of a single session set in the aggrieved couple's living room.

Bob Sorenson and Amy Resnick, familiar faces for ATC audiences, play Michael and Veronica, parents of the offstage victim, who lost two teeth in the fight. Michael is an old-school hardware wholesaler, while Veronica as a socially conscious writer, struggles to keep his rough edges smoothed. Alain and Annette, played by ATC newcomers Benjamin Evett and Joey Parsons, are the parents of the assailant, and in more aggressive professions: lawyer and wealth management executive, respectively.



Tim Fuller

Anette (Joey Powell) faces off with Michael (Bob Sorenson) in ATC's 'God of Carnage'

Rather than the well-made play device of found and lost letters to provide plot complications, "God of Carnage" updates the convention with telephones to bring in external developments. Alan's cellphone vibrates annoyingly with panicked calls from his pharmaceutical company client who has been hiding serious side effects by one of its drugs. Michael and Veronica's more traditional home phone rings with calls from Michael's mother as she prepares for a knee replacement. Guess which drug her doctor is recommending?

"God of Carnage" won the 2009 Tony Award for Best Play. It was originally written in French by Parisian novelist and playwright Yasmina Reza and translated by Christopher Hampton. Reza's credits include the play "Art," which ATC presented in 2000. That work also features an escalating confrontation over a matter of opinion that expands until it seeps into all aspects of the characters' relationships.

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Hampton has written librettos (he shared a Tony for "Sunset Boulevard"), and translated and adapted a variety of works to plays or films, including "Les Liaisons Dangereuses," and "Atonement." He's a guy who knows a thing or two about characterization and plot development. Other than one odd line that a man should be "textured," there's no way to discern that this is a translated work. The text is tight, well-written and laugh-provoking.

One concern is the accelerating use of F-bombs in the dialogue towards the latter third of the play, not out of any pious objection to expletives, but because the tactic simply loses impact around the seventh or eighth iteration. An "Exorcist"-like scene involving copious stage-vomit seemed to divide the audience between giggles and revulsion. Later, that character's gastric issues seemed at odds with her subsequent binge drinking.

Director Rick Lombardo, here from his day job as artistic director for the San Jose Repertory Theatre, engineers a well-paced comedic experience. His expert blocking moves his four charges around the living room in a very subtle and natural way, invading territory and articulating shifting alliances within the group. All four cast members turn in great performances and some increasingly physical shtick over the course of the play.

Reza makes the point that we are not far removed from our Neanderthal ancestors, that civilized behavior is a thin veneer barely covering our primal nature. To reinforce this, the set by Kent Dorsey includes cave-like sandstone walls as the backdrop. In the final moments, the point is reiterated when the walls glow with luminous cave drawings by lighting designer David Lee Cuthbert.

Beowulf Alley's 'Lear' is black, stark and so minimal that it makes 'Waiting for Godot' look busy

In contrast, the stage for Beowulf Alley's "Lear" is black, stark and so minimal that it makes "Waiting for Godot" look busy. Throughout the production, choices are made to help contain costs for the small company putting on a robust play with a ten-member cast. Rather than costuming, the actors wear contemporary business and evening attire that probably came from their own wardrobes. It's distracting for about 5 seconds, and then the Bard's powerful vocabulary and rhythms begin to hypnotize again.

With its original 26 scenes over 4 acts cut or compressed significantly though not cruelly, Fenlason utilizes a young cast that draws heavily on the University of Arizona's outstanding theatre program. Four of the cast are current students or recent graduates, and Lear himself is played by University of Arizona English professor Bill Epstein in his seventh appearance on the BAT stage.

Particularly interesting were Alex Greengard as Edmond, the Earl's conniving bastard; Aaron Guisinger as Edgar, the Earl's legitimate son and rightful heir; Bree Boyd as Lear's haughty eldest daughter, Goneril; and Breezy Giger in a gender-bending performance as Lear's ubiquitous and loyal servant, the Earl of Kent.

Jacob Brown, as Lear's Fool, adds a comic note to the rage and mayhem, prancing and sing-songing his commentaries. Rounding out the cast are Kathleenn Cannon as youngest daughter Cordelia, Cody Davis as servant Oswald, Amy Loehrs as middle daughter, Regan, and Mark Klugheit as the Earl of Gloucester

The cast has done a good job of memorizing their lengthy tongue-twisting lines. Their deliveries are sometimes more earnest than intuitive, but the overall timing and interplay is excellent. In an effective re-write that highlights their evil, Goneril and Regan themselves blind the imprisoned Gloucester in a scene that demonstrates how creative choice, good stage blocking and a little fake blood can create a monstrous impact. Also, the final fight scene between Greengard and Guisinger as the Earl's sons was an outstanding display of stage combat skills and choreography.

More experienced patrons may prefer the polish and sophistication of "God of Carnage" at ATC. Newcomers to the theatre, especially students, might enjoy the edginess and accessibility of "Lear" at BATC. "God of Carnage" is professional and humorous. "Lear" is energetic and dark. Very different plays with divergent intentions and resources, yet both succeed.