

'God of Carnage' works up quite a lather

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Camile Bounds

The 2009 Tony Award-winning play *God Of Carnage* opened at the Morgan Hill Playhouse on April 8 and raised the bar on South Valley Civic Theatre presentations. We have talent here in our little town and it's really good.



After failing to resolve their differences, the two couples in South Valley Civic Theatre's production of *God of Carnage* are exhausted. Pictured clockwise from top left are Doug Doughty, Peter Mandel, Beth Harnett and Karyn Rondeau.

Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

Peter Mandel, Beth Harnett, Doug Doughty, and Karyn Rondeau give energetic, well timed performances as parents who start out civilly trying to settle a problem between their sons. (One broke two teeth of the other.) French playwright Yasmina Reza's story starts out calm and works up into a near-physical battle that makes *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf* look like a picnic in the park.

Well translated by Christopher Hampton and skillfully directed by Bryan Freeman, the play gives an inside look at adults taking up a challenge, with each putting their spin on the subject. Marriages, morality and sanity are tested on the merry-go-round of their lives.

Freeman moves his actors like prize fighters coming out of their corners, with a space shuttle's timing. He carefully jostles the scenes so at times the story becomes a humorous, emotional battleground.

God Of Carnage brings scenic and lighting designers Freeman and Matthew Hendrickson along with costumer Mary Dokter together to complete this production.

For an evening of enjoyable theatre be prepared to be shaken and tickled for 90 minutes.

South Valley Civic Theatre presents 'God Of Carnage'

Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, Fifth and Monterey streets, Morgan Hill

Performances through April 30

Tickets: \$22; Seniors \$18; Students \$15

Reservations and information: (408) 842-7469 or visit svct.org.

SVCT's 'God of Carnage' is a comedy of manners without the manners

Broadway version won a Tony Award for best play in 2009

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By Marty Cheek / Photos by Marty Cheek



Beth Harnett (left), as Annette Raleigh, listens to an argument Doug Gough, as Michael Novak, has with Karyn Rondeau, performing as his wife Veronica Novak, in "God of Carnage."

Four New York City grownups descend into a childish war of words in the Tony-award winning comedy “God of Carnage,” the South Valley Civic Theatre’s new show now playing at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

Originally written in French by Yasmina Reza, the play is an intense psychological study of two sets of parents, one of whose child has physically hurt the other at a public park. They meet at one couple’s apartment to discuss the matter in a civilized manner. As the evening progresses, the parents become increasingly infantile and bicker with each other, resulting the discussion devolving into chaos. The original Broadway cast included Jeff Daniels, Hope Davis, James Gandolfini and Marcia Gay Harden and all four actors were nominated for Tony Awards for their performances.



Peter Mandel, as Alan Raleigh, keeps taking cell phone calls during the play, interrupting the discussion.

SVCT perennial actor Peter Mandel plays the role of Alan Raleigh, the obnoxiously rude attorney who keeps interrupting the parental discussion to answer his cell phone to deal with a legal case.

“The show is really a character study of two sets of parents who come together to try to peacefully discuss a playground incident between their children,” he said. “As time goes by, all of the pretense of them coming together and being constructively engaging in trying to work things out peacefully breaks down and their real personalities come through.”

As a lawyer in the play, Mandel takes an attorney’s no-nonsense point of view to the discussion, he said.

“He has less patience for the pretense because in his mind he has more important things to do and does not really want to get into the responsible parent routine,” he said.



Beth Harnett plays his wife Annette Raleigh. The other couple is played by Doug Doughty as Michael Novak and Karyn Rondeau as Veronica Novak. The play was directed by Bryan Freeman and was co-produced by Matthew Hendrickson and Donna Cowan.

The 70-minute play is performed without intermission which allows the actors the opportunity to increasingly raise the emotional level of their characters as all pretended civility collapses.

“It’s an over-the-top hilarious comedy,” Mandel said. “The thing from an actor’s point of view is that this is not a ‘gag, punchline, gag, punchline’ script. The humor is in all of the nature of the characters, their relationships, and how all of these emotions spin up and escalate in ways that are unanticipated. Everything about it and the way that the characters relate to each other is all quite funny.”

Mandel credits Freeman as a “strong director” for bringing out the honesty of each character’s personality in the four actors’ performances.

“He has to see where the humor is going to come from,” he said. “He’s got to understand all the subtleties and relationships between the performers and let all that out in us. We’re fortunate to have a director who allows us to do that.”

Co-producer Hendrickson said the show is not the usual comedy fare that SVCT has produced in past years because it delves into the rawness of human nature.

“It’s a dark comedy. It is very funny but it has a lot of edginess to it,” he said. “It’s funny but because of the situation, you feel bad for laughing sometimes but you can’t help it. You laugh at the ridiculous of it and the intensity of it, especially when they get into the arguments — that really builds that humor up a lot.”

The set is an important element in creating a “hellish” atmosphere for the play, he said. Unlike the original Broadway production which had a “black box” set that was sparse and suggested windows and doors, the SVCT producers decided to create a contemporary New York City apartment which had a stark, clean look of grey walls suggesting a prison.

“It’s suppose to be a bleak open space,” he said. “The reasons we don’t have any doors or openings is because there’s no way in or out for the two couples. They’re trapped in the room. That’s the whole point of the set and the story.”

Hendrickson’s co-producer Cowan said she’s impressed with the quality of the show and enjoyed working with the cast.

“Their contemporary characters have been developed to add realism to this play,” she said.

“‘God of Carnage’ is a 2009 cutting-edge, dark comedy which adds artistic merit to the SVCT repertoire. In keeping with contemporary theatre today, SVCT is featuring plays that depict and appeal to our diverse community.”