

AMERICAN THEATRE

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STAGING 'GOD OF CARNAGE' NEAR A HOUSE OF GOD

By Rob Weinert-Kendt

Elements Theatre Company, a stage troupe within a Benedictine Christian community, forgoes religious pageantry for a mix of classics and new plays.



Brad Lussier, Sr. Danielle Dwyer and Chris Kanaga in Elements Theatre Company's "God of Carnage"

ORLEANS, MASS.: You've heard of *Murder in the Cathedral*. How about *Carnage* in the monastery? That's more or less what will transpire when Elements Theatre Company—the

resident stage company at the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical monastic outpost on Cape Cod—presents French playwright Yasmina Reza’s Tony-winning play *God of Carnage*, a coruscating comedy of bad manners featuring projectile vomiting, profanity and wanton cellphone destruction. The production, helmed by artistic director Danielle Dwyer, will first be mounted off-site, in the non-ecclesial setting of the Art House in nearby Provincetown, Nov. 7–9.

But then it comes home to the Paraclete House, on the sprawling grounds of the Community of Jesus, Nov. 14–23—directly across from the stunning Church of the Transfiguration, and among the friary, convent and single-family homes in which adherents from a variety of Christian denominations live in accordance with Benedictine principles while pursuing a variety of creative endeavors, from jam-making to farming to music. The theatre company, founded in 1992, is comprised of celibate brothers and sisters—Dwyer is among these ranks—as well as community members who may be married or single and who live offsite, but are more invested in the community’s activities than your average weekly church congregant. Chris Kanaga, who plays Michael, is a lawyer by day; and Brad Lussier, who plays Alan, is the company dramaturg.

So how will Reza’s biting play go over with the Elements audience? Well, for a clue, the last Elements production was a robust, bloody rendition of *Julius Caesar*, staged in the stately courtyard of the church itself—which should indicate that neither the church community nor the audience is full of shrinking violets.

“The violence and the disrespect and the emotions of this play are not that different from *Julius Caesar*,” reasons Dwyer, who also plays the role of Annette. “Dealing with our human condition and how we act toward each other—that fits our theatre’s mission, and that’s what we’re dedicated to exploring.” Dwyer says that when they do a modern piece, they look for “something that has classical roots to it, that will allow for a journey for the audience and the actor.” She cites one of the lesser-known Benedictine vows, which even oblates take.

“The vow of conversion is another doorway to see another part of yourself,” Dwyer explains. “So a character will leave us with something of themselves that will change us. That’s an important part of why we do what we do.”

While Dwyer can’t say whether Elements’s relatively edgy programming is unique among Benedictine communities, Kanaga notes that most religious communities he knows of who do theatre “commit themselves to sacred theatre or mystery plays.” But Dwyer is quick to point out what theatre and religion have in common: “Being authentic and truthful, and willing to serve and make sacrifices for a larger goal—that’s in all theatre.”



CAPE COD TIMES

CIVILITY TURNS UGLY IN CLEVER 'CARNAGE'

By Roger Shoemaker
Contributing writer, Cape Cod Times

There is something funny and disturbing and wonderfully dramatic happening in Orleans. It is Elements Theater Company's production of Yasmina Reza's "God of Carnage."



COURTESY OF ELEMENTS THEATRE COMPANY Rachel McKendree, left, and Sister Danielle Dwyer play mothers of schoolmates in Elements Theatre Company's production of "God of Carnage."

On Stage

What: “God of Carnage”

Written by: Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton

Presented by: Elements Theatre Company

When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3...

ORLEANS – There is something funny and disturbing and wonderfully dramatic happening in Orleans. It is Elements Theater Company’s production of Yasmina Reza’s “God of Carnage.”

We enter a tastefully appointed living room, in which two couples have met to have a civilized and productive conversation about the fact that one couple’s son has hit the other couple’s son in the mouth with a bamboo pole, breaking two teeth.

Our hostess, Veronica Vallon, is the mother of 11-year old Bruno of the broken teeth. She is a writer, art historian and all-around good-doer. Her husband, Michael, is a home-goods wholesaler, mild of manners.

The parents of aggressor Freddy are Alan, an attorney in the employ of a pharmaceutical firm, and his wife, Annette, who describes herself as in “wealth management” (presumably Alan’s).

The two couples are working overly hard to be civil in what clearly has the possibility of becoming a heated confrontation. As expected, civility soon breaks down, and what ensues is a complex dance of conflicts and alliances which pit each and all against each and all in a production which is excruciatingly funny, and at times just plain excruciating.

Rachel McKendree, as Veronica, drives the first half of the play with her ever-fading grip on civility at all costs. Michael, as played by Chris Kanag, undergoes an extraordinary transformation as the play proceeds, eventually taking off his sweater, untucking his shirt and displaying the self his wife has tried so hard to hide.

Brad Lussier, as Alan the attorney, also moves to shirtsleeves, but is able to hang on to his intellectual distance, even though he continues to call his wife by her pet name, “Woof-Woof.”

Sister Danielle Dwyer, as “Woof-Woof” herself, Annette, also displays virtuoso acting skills as her character moves from prim reasonableness to the chaos of despair.

And, yes, all of it is very, very funny. This is the kind of humor that makes you think. You laugh, then are ashamed of yourself for laughing. Then you laugh again, this time harder.

Elements Theatre Company is a true repertory company and more, in that not only are the same actors involved in the productions, but they are also a major part of the creative production team. The show is ably directed by Dwyer. She has a lovely feel for pace and style, without which this script could easily fall into farce or melodrama, and it is neither. Lussier is the company's dramaturg, and McKendree Veronica teaches classes and workshops for the company. Kanaga is the technical director and has coordinated an excellent set design by Sisters Sarah Allen and Annemarie Norman, and effective and unobtrusive lighting design by Tom Lynch and Steve Witter. Costumes, stage properties, sound effects, every detail is carefully chosen to enforce the style and content of the Element Theatre Company's production of this extraordinary script.

This play and production represent the 21st-century evolution of the theatrical worldviews of Chekhov, only with easier names, and Albee's famous two-couples play "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" only with humor in place of vitriol. It is a fine night of theater, and audiences will come away both entertained and enlightened.