

Cathartic 'Killer Joe' Is Not Just Tarantino Farce

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Yulia Peresild as Dottie, the ditzy beauty, and Alexander Novin as the dozy beefcake in Tracy Letts' "Killer Joe." **Kirill Iosipenko**

It was halfway through Javor Gardev's production of Tracy Letts' "Killer Joe" that my trust meter began to wobble.

The tale of a family of dorks and innocents hiring an ominous police hitman to snuff out an ex-wife and mom in order to grab the insurance just began to run thin, plain and simple.

There's something about the genre of violent farce that makes almost everybody working in it come up with the same twists and turns.

I can't say whether Letts wrote this in 1993 under the influence of Quentin Tarantino's "Reservoir Dogs," but because of the omnipresent Tarantino style now, it's hard to watch something like "Killer Joe" without thinking of the whole Tarantino industry.

That may be unfair, but life and art are anything but fair.

But this is only a preamble because something happened on the way down that slippery slope to same old, same old.

Shortly after it looked like this show was headed straight for cliché-ville, it snapped to as if that is what it was planning to do all along. And it came careening home to a conclusion — no, a string of conclusions — that packed a wallop.

What happened is that the individual human stories began to push aside the tricks of the genre. Quite unexpectedly I realized that I cared about these people from a dusty Texas town, or at least I was intrigued by them, regardless of how stupid or sadistic they were.

Gardev encouraged his actors to play one-dimensional figures straight out of the comics.

Ansel Smith (Andrei Fomin) is the quintessential fuzz-headed, weak-kneed macho trailer king. His second wife Sharla (Yelena Morozova), who has a rude way of bending over with her long legs held perfectly straight, is the epitome of the diner waitress bombshell. Ansel's son Chris (Alexander Novin) is the typical young buck with muscles in both his head and his arms.

Chris' kid sister Dottie (Yulia Peresild) goes beyond all clichés. She is a kind of naturally lobotomized beauty who will do, say or agree with almost anything she is told. Her dreaminess has little to do with real dreams and everything to do with a mind that has surrendered to platitudes ingested by osmosis from the ever-present television set.

Enter Joe Cooper (Vitaly Khayev), a local cop who doubles as a hitman. Smart, twisted and admirably systematic as only a professional can be, he was hired by Chris to knock off Chris' birth mother, a drunken slob who hated her husband and never loved her children.

Joe convinces the family to give Dottie to him as a down payment for his services and, somehow, with events coming precariously close to tipping the scales into sleaze, the human element kicks in.

Letts' Smith family is so clueless, and Killer Joe is so organized that all of these caricatures begin acquiring the paradoxes that remind us of the human condition. Somehow, people caught being idiots evoke sympathy; the horrible sounds funny, and phony affections start becoming real.

Once all of this happens, people's unthinking actions pile up consequences like a 10-car crash-up on a foggy Texas highway.

I purposefully avoid describing what turns the plot takes because surprise is a crucial element in this show. But the journey from that moment when I thought I had lost touch to those final scenes when I found myself entranced was a true and well-wrought theatrical turnaround. I believe "catharsis" is the word we usually use to describe the experience.

The cast works together like the separate parts of a single, well-oiled machine. But I must single out the extraordinary and unlikely pair of lovers played by Khayev and Peresild.

The slight cracks in Joe's seemingly impenetrable armor and the spiritual strength of the

weak and malleable Dottie are what make it possible, and imperative, to reassess all of the characters by the time the dust settles.

Nikola Toromanov provided the appropriately junky set, a huge trailer that opens up in the first seconds like a UFO sending down a gangplank.

Gardev filled his production with memorable images, but perhaps the finest was that of Khayev holding a hair dryer in one hand and a lamp in the other to illuminate the Madonna-like face of Peresild who stood rapturous and wrapped in the Texan state flag. Gorgeous. That was the moment when this show kicked into overdrive.

“Killer Joe,” a production of the Theater of Nations, plays Feb. 16 at 7 p.m. at Theater Na Maloi Bronnoi, located at 4 Malaya Bronnaya Ulitsa, Metro Pushkinskaya, and Feb. 23 at 7 p.m. at the Meyerhold Center, located at 23 Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa, Metro Novoslobodskaya. Tel. 629-3739. www.theatreofnations.ru. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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