

CARNAGE

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and at the Guthrie in Minneapolis, both earlier this year.

And two of the top theaters in Florida are staging it this season: Florida Repertory Theatre in Fort Myers and the Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota. I talked to the two directors — Dennis Lee Delaney, who's guest directing at the Florida Rep, and Greg Leaming at the Asolo. Because of logistics and rehearsal schedules, I talked to them separately, asking the same questions. Here's a condensed, edited version of our conversations.

■ What is it about "The God of Carnage" that has gripped audiences and made it one of the most popular works being currently produced?

• **MR. DELANEY:** It's pretty fascinating for a number of reasons. First, to just see an ensemble of four great actors go at it... It's a field day for them in terms of getting to run the gamut of emotions.

It starts out conservative and dry, two couples meeting to talk reasonably about this confrontation that happened between their sons. Slowly and surely, you see the veneer of civilization that we all have crumble and you see that one guy's a savage, underneath it all... We see each character, in their own way, let go of their social mask and get down to the core of who they are as human beings...

This play is relentlessly, hysterically funny. We keep drawing parallels with "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" That's a savage marital drama — but a funny, funny play. We want to capture both aspects in "God of Carnage."

• **MR. LEAMING:** It's an extremely volatile play, dark but very humorous. That makes it very interesting to a lot of theaters. The other reason is, it's so intensely literate... very well constructed and tightly written.

As we work on it in rehearsal, we're finding it's a very tightly woven network of conflicting intentions. Characters will actually respond to something, a nerve being hit, three or four pages after the nerve is hit. It's very interesting that way. There's an awful lot bubbling under the surface... When a person explodes in rage, involuntarily, it often comes from buttons that have been pushed a couple of times more than those times we see on stage. It's that kind of relationship and involuntary response that this play is about.

One of the things I discovered is that it's a lot like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" In both plays, you don't know why people go as far as they do in their rage... for an audience, being in the room with them is fascinating and terrifying at the same time. "God of Carnage" is, of course, a much funnier play.

■ "God of Carnage" has one set and four characters and basically takes place over an afternoon. What are the challenges of directing this?

• **MR. LEAMING:** There are huge challenges. Every director and actor works on a production as if it were a series of building blocks. Each of those building blocks is called a beat. Usually a beat has a beginning, middle and end. They all are connected and lead forward. This play does not break down into beats. The characters don't stop and regroup.

We compare it to getting on a roller coaster: Once you're on, you're on; you can't stop and think, you just have to go with it. You have to go where it takes you.

• **MR. DELANEY:** It's definitely a somewhat claustrophobic story... one



DAVID DACK MAKI / SNAPFLASHPHOTO

The cast of "God of Carnage" at the Florida Rep: Craig Bockhorn, Carrie Lund, Shelley Delaney and Chris Clavelli.



SCOTT BRAUN / COURTESY PHOTO

The cast of "God of Carnage" at the Asolo Repertory Theatre.

set, and you never leave that set. That provides a unique challenge... The four characters share the responsibility of carrying the play. They're constantly jumping in and giving their opinions. You have to keep your eye on the ball of all four — where they are physically, emotionally, and in relationship to each other physically and emotionally.

It's a fun challenge. You don't often get plays where it's that concentrated on four characters.

■ So is this play like a chamber piece for actors?

• **MR. DELANEY:** It does operate almost like a piece of music. You can think of them like a string quartet: occasionally playing off of each other, occasionally playing as an ensemble; occasional dissonance, interesting harmonics, and moments where it all falls apart. Which is wonderful in itself...

It's not a string quartet in the old fashioned way. It's more Bartok than Beethoven. It has lots of sharp edges to it.

• **MR. LEAMING:** I guess you could call it that.

Yasmina Reza's plays have more of a musical structure than a dramatic structure... One person will be at a certain pitch while the other three are at a different pitch. Another character will join in and they'll do a duet. Sometimes

it's a trio, sometimes it's a quartet... that's the shape of many of her plays.

■ How is this similar to Ms. Reza's earlier play, "Art"?

• **MR. DELANEY:** There are a lot of similarities. She likes the idea of throwing characters together in a room and letting them bounce off of each other. It's the same kind of dynamic (as "Art"), but they're not friends.

And it's not just these two couples against each other. It's against themselves, within their relationship.

• **MR. LEAMING:** I think it's more similar to her play "Live x 3," in which a crying child offstage destroys a cocktail party, completely shatters it. "Theater of nerves" is what she calls her theater; she writes about people who are on edge, or close to a breakdown... incidents on stage push them further into the abyss.

Like "Life x 3," ("The God of Carnage") is examining the kind of animal instincts that are aroused the minute people discuss their children. Not just the protective instinct. Children bring out, in a funny way, the worst in people. You can't be rational when you talk about your children. That's certainly the case here... The playwright is playing with characters whose nerves are already frayed.

■ How do you think audiences will respond to this play?

• **MR. DELANEY:** They're gonna love it, I have no doubt... I think audiences are eager to embrace the idea of: Who's got the power? Who's in control at any given moment in the play? It's a very fun thing to track.

• **MR. LEAMING:** I'm not sure. All we can do is do the play and do it on the best possible level. I think audiences will have a spectacular time with it. We chose it for that reason. When you're in the room with this kind of playwriting, you're horrified and fascinated by it.

There's a kind of complicity that's very exciting in the theater. That's a huge part of the audience's response. I think that's where the laughter comes from.

All we can do is do the play we think has been written, and bring out the structure as much as possible, and the complexity of the characters and the situation and hope the audience has a wonderful time as we have.

I think this going to be a fascinating experience.

■ "Carnage," a film version of the play, just came out. Have you seen it, or do you plan to see it?

• **MR. DELANEY:** No. I don't know that I have time to see it. Roman Polanski's a great director, the cast is terrific. He specializes in these claustrophobic type films.

I don't doubt they did a great job with it. But I don't see a strong need to see someone's idea of the play. It's kind of interesting timing that it's coming out right when we're about to do it.

An audience member could go see the film and it would be really interesting for them to see the play and compare. I'm sure they'd be completely and wildly different from each other. You have four different actors, a different director, a different medium. What you do on film and stage are two very different things.

• **MR. LEAMING:** (He has not seen the film and doesn't plan to.) I've been thrilled to see that the reviews of the movie have not been good.

This playwright has structured this play to be experienced in a live theater. As soon as you take (it out of the theater, you take) the life out of it. You lose the audience's complicity. You lose that the audience is almost horrified by being in the same room with this.

In a movie theater, you can easily turn away and block anything out; in the theater, you're forced to stay on board... you become part of the movement of the event. In the film, you're stepping back and watching it.

With theater, you step into that room and you're part of it, you're engaged, and you're responsible in a funny way for everything that happens in there. ■

in the know

"God of Carnage"

>> **When:** Jan. 6-22 (previews Jan. 3-5)

>> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre, Fort Myers

>> **Tickets:** \$40, \$45; previews, \$25, \$20

>> **Info:** 332-4488 or www.floridarep.org

>> **When:** Jan 13-April 6

>> **Where:** Asolo Repertory Theatre, Sarasota

>> **Tickets:** \$65, \$57, \$37, \$29

>> **Info:** (941) 351-8000 or www.asolorep.org