

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

SUNDAY : PART II

March 20, 2005

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

THEATER

Anyone
for sex,
cruelty,
squalor?

In his plays and acting roles, Tracy Letts is all about connecting with what life has taught him in the 'real' world.

By CHARLES McNULTY
Special to The Times

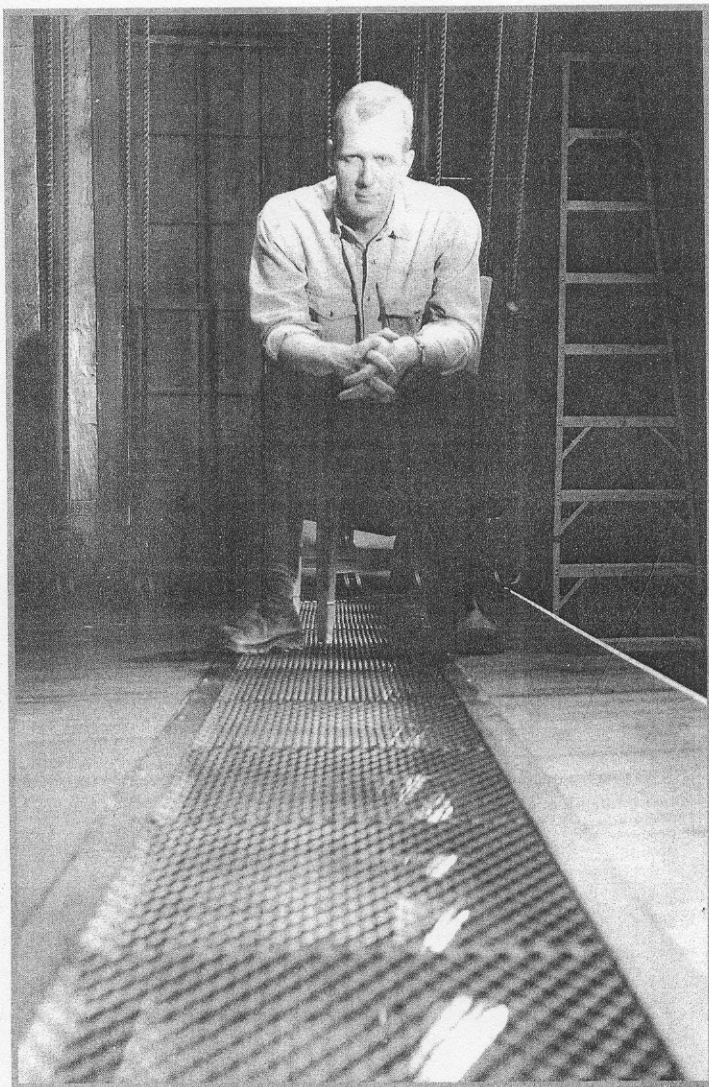
A *New York* S a playwright who has made his name writing about trailer parks and fleabag motels, Tracy Letts doesn't mind acknowledging his own checkered past. Though it pales in comparison to what he luridly depicts in "Killer Joe" and "Bug," the plays that have turned him into the bard of white-trash America, Letts has a history every bit as harrowing as his protagonists', even if his recent successes in playwriting and acting have made it seem a lifetime away.

"The characters I write about are not unknown to me," Letts says over lunch at a Greenwich Village cafe around the corner from the off-Broadway theater where he's performing with a group of Chicago friends in Austin Pendleton's play "Orson's Shadow." "I grew up around a lower-middle-class environment in which I interacted with the people I write about, so they always seemed very real to me."

The realism of Letts' work can indeed be overwhelming. The plays don't just spill over with squalid sex and violence, they lay bare the emptiness driving the characters to their desperate ends.

Combining the emotional rawness of Sam Shepard and the sensational storytelling of Quentin Tarantino, Letts' plays have become sleeper hits during their runs in Chicago, London and New York. His most recent drama, the 2004 Pulitzer Prize finalist "The Man From Nebraska," had its premiere in December 2003 at Steppenwolf Theatre, where Letts has become a member of the company's acting ensemble, renowned for the daring, visceral style of its stalwarts Gary Sinise and John Malkovich.

"Killer Joe," which opened Saturday in a Lost Angels production at Hollywood's Gardner Stages, revolves around a family that stretches the word "dysfunctional" to the breaking point. In the play, 22-year-old Chris Smith hatches a plan to get a few loan sharks off his back: Hire a hit man to kill his alcoholic mother and collect on the life insurance plan. Without much



JENNIFER S. ALTMAN For The Times

A DRIVEN MAN: "One of the impulses behind writing the plays was to write good roles for actors," Letts says. "I wanted to give them something down and dirty that they could sink their teeth into."

'Killer Joe'

Where: Gardner Stages,
1501 N. Gardner St., L.A.

When: Runs 8 p.m. Fridays
and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays

Ends: April 17

Price: \$20 to \$25

Contact: (866) 811-4111.
www.lostangels theatre.com

coaxing, his father, stepmother and sister are brought on board. Joe, the title character, is the gun for hire who takes over the Smith family trailer, demanding Chris' virginal sister as down payment for the job, and exposing the levels to which the family is prepared to descend.

"'Killer Joe' is a very American play about the dream of getting rich quick," says Scott Cummings, who's directing the Lost Angels production. "It's about the consequences of doing whatever you can, in an incredibly entertaining drama that turns gothic in its outcome."

The play certainly challenges an audience's capacity for shock. It's not simply the brutality but the creepy humor accompanying it that disturbs. One notorious instance involves a symbolic rape with a Kentucky Fried Chicken drumstick, a scene that bears comparison only to the excruciatingly bloody tooth extraction in "Bug." Letts' second play about the budding relationship between a grief-stricken woman holed up in motel room and a paranoid Gulf War veteran who believes the government has planted microbes under his skin.

A hot commodity

THOUGH the grisliness of his work isn't to everyone's taste, Letts is clearly tapping a cultural vein. There's talk of turning "Killer Joe" into a movie, and director William Friedkin ("The French Connection" and "The Exorcist") has optioned "Bug" and signed Letts to pen the screenplay.

It's a remarkable turnaround for an artist who's grappled with drug and alcohol abuse and the unexpected death (from a series of strokes) of his girlfriend, Holly Wantuch, who was in the cast of the original production of "Killer Joe" and to whom the play is dedicated.

A strapping 39-year-old with a deep, resonant voice and a pale, round face, Letts was born in Tulsa, Okla., and grew up in [See Letts, Page E35]