

BACKSTAGE

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KILLER JOE

at the Gardner Stages



Reviewed by Paul Birchall

Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright Tracy Letts' 1993 comedy is an assured work of pulp fiction: a cracklingly rendered dose of white-trashy grotesquerie punctuated by dark, bleak humor. Letts skillfully depicts a group of horrifyingly believable trailer-trash louts who would not be out of place in an episode of *Jerry Springer*, where they would most assuredly brain each other with chairs.

Dimwit hick slacker Chris (Joe Sikora) owes thugs a fortune, and he comes up with an innovative, if utterly heartless, means of saving his skin. In a development ripped right from the pages of the *News of the Weird*, Chris and his equally doltish dad, Ansel (Loren Lazerine), decide to hire a hitman to kill Chris' divorced mother. Mom has a life insurance policy which will pay out to Chris's mentally handicapped sister Dottie (Corryn Cummins), who lives with Ansel. Given that the two idiots don't have enough cash to pay him, the hitman—moonlighting police detective Killer Joe (Paul Dillon)—agrees to accept the assignment "on spec" but only if the sad-faced Dottie will become his lover. As soon as these charming arrangements are taken care of, Killer Joe goes about his commendable job. Afterwards, though, Chris and Ansel discover that they are way out of their depth with their terrifying new ally.

Director Scott Cummins' dynamic production, burning with fierce energy and undercurrents of menace, is no upbeat family tale. Indeed the clan motto of this bunch of revolting dreadfuls could just as

easily be "The Family That Stays Together, Slays Together." Letts' themes of matricide, guilt, and revenge might be the stuff of classical Greek drama, but the characters here proceed without benefit of conscience or even self-awareness; they're just demonic monsters, acting on appetite and impulse. The uniformly strong acting artfully communicates the characters' instinctive wickedness. Sikora's punch-drunk brute is strangely likeable, even as he plots acts that chill the blood, and so is Cummins' sweetly slow-witted Dottie. However, the standout performance is Dillon's spooky Killer Joe, who, possessed of an eerie, eagle-browed stare, offers a surface of courtliness that never quite hides his inner beast.

"Killer Joe," presented by Lost Angels Theatre Company at the Gardner Stages, 1501 Gardner St., Hollywood. Fri-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. Mar. 18-Apr. 17. \$20-25. (866) 811-4111.