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Theater review Parents, kids and the gaps in between

"Jingle Spree" - Don't look for comfortable closure in this play centered on a shooting

Wednesday, October 18, 2006

RICHARD WATTENBERG

Loaded firearms and kids at play often make a tragically lethal combination.

Thankfully, Portland native Dan Trujillo does more than dramatize this dreadfully apparent truth in his play "Jingle Spree," which is receiving a thoughtful and often riveting presentation from CoHo Productions.

Blending humor and psychological insight, Trujillo's play about children, adults and a gun artfully explores the great gaps in understanding and communication that separate kids and parents.

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The first of the play's three acts focuses on the children as they entertain themselves in a supposedly safe home environment while their parents tend to a yard sale outside. Rummaging through an attic, the youngsters stumble upon fragments from the adult world – pornographic magazines, a six-pack of beer, a gun. Their ill-equipped minds allow them to assimilate these artifacts only through the crudest forms of imitation.

Occurring simultaneously in time with the first act, the second focuses on the adults. Weary and frustrated with the trials of child-rearing, these parents enjoy a brief reprieve from parental duty. Interestingly, like the children, they bicker and banter – slipping, perhaps not surprisingly, into childish game-playing.

Both acts end shockingly when a child, Alan, pulls the trigger on a gun he never should have found. Set five years later, Act 3 presents the awkward dance of Alan, just released from the Woodburn juvenile facilities, and the adults closest to him as they try to come to terms with what's happened.

"Jingle Spree" is not a tightly plotted affair. While Trujillo's play revolves around the shooting incident, it doesn't explain or explain away that deed. Sure, Trujillo suggests reasons why and how it occurred. But he doesn't tie the event up in a neat package, nor does he offer the balm of a comfortable closure.

There are loose ends here, and that's the play's power: It has the complexity of life, while taking us on what feels like a carefully charted voyage that allows us to see the similarities, differences, and spaces between the young and the not-so-young.

One of the play's challenges is that each actor has to play both a child and an adult character. While the pairing seems more logical for the women (each of whom plays a daughter and her mother), the fact that actors have to play both sides of the generation gap suggests the heightened awareness of both worlds that Trujillo may be trying to foster in adult audiences.

Director Antonio Sonera's cast does fine work. The interpretation of the children – while occasionally humorous, especially early on – never descends into caricature, and in the adult roles the actors perform with both honesty and intensity.

Eric Reid skillfully plays Alan Potts, the child shooter, both as a clumsy, sputtering 9-year-old and as a tormented gangsta-speaking teen. Reid also takes the role of Alan's smoothly arrogant uncle in the second act. Deanna Wells captures the troubled silent little sister in Act 1, and then in Acts 2 and 3 moves easily into the role of Alison, Alan's mother – skillfully tracking the depth of emotion that silently swells within this young woman. Bill Barry is also genuinely sympathetic in the role of Alan's well-meaning stepfather, Karl.



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