

Saturday

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THEATER REVIEW: Cast, crew bravely tackle family drama's challenges

By Mark Hughes Cobb Staff Writer

It takes guts to create a work of art, one ostensibly aimed at audiences, and not include one fully likable character.

With an exception made for the little kid running through and doing kid stuff, 'cause that's cool.

Multiply that churlish quality times a tangle of plots that don't satisfactorily resolve, with vague ghost-story hints that don't add up, and the kind of family secret so ugly, it's hard to imagine how it could be twisted for comic effect -- and it's mostly not -- and you've made a challenging work.

That's what playwright Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins created with "Appropriate," a title with multiple meanings, one of them evident only if you know that Jacobs-Jenkins is African-American, and typically writes on themes of, in his words, "blackness." The cast of "Appropriate" is all white, a family following Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" principle, such that you have to guess if these folks, individually and in their own spaces, are as nasty a horror as when they clash together.

While it's satirical, the play, concluding with a 2 p.m. matinee Sunday in the Marian Galloway Theatre, isn't what anyone should call a comedy, though there are a few laughs scattered, mostly of the nervous variety. TV's "Seinfeld" became a hit despite its characters' self-centered

nature and all-around awfulness (in case you've forgotten how twisted it could get, watch the one where Jerry can't sit through "Schindler's List" without cracking jokes), primarily because ~~it had the~~ wit to both laugh with and at Jerry, Elaine, Kramer and George.

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~~Director Steve Buchheit~~ This cast and crew took on this monster -- like the implicit ghost in the gothic machine, there's ugliness both atop and underneath the surface -- bravely and well. The cast embodies the family so thoroughly, it feels at times more like the Thanksgiving togetherness many are dreading than a creation sliced out of mind. The premise is simple: The patriarch of the Lafayette family has died, leaving a musty, overcrowded mansion and its bills to be sorted out by his grown children, eldest sibling Toni (Allison Hetzel), middle child and steady -- ish -- man Bo (Ian Andersen), and the baby flake Franz (Zach Stolz). Along to add to the confusion are Toni's estranged son Rhys (Evan Ector); Bo's wife Rachel (Chelsea Reynolds) and children Cassie (Leah Nicoll) and Ainsley (Evy Alley, the one actual child in a childish family); and Franz's earthmama-fiancee River (Elizabeth Thiel). Hetzel heroically carries the bulk of the freight as a woman whose only sympathetic moments are few, though Stolz's Franz tends to draw you in, being as he almost becomes someone worth liking. Thiel's presence is assured but gentle, an interesting balance given that she's playing a supposedly immature adult. Reynolds and Andersen capture the back-and-forth of a long-married, dutifully together couple out to the tension points, while the teen kids, Ector and Nicoll, like Stolz, dimly suggest hope for the next generation, assuming they escape. Alley's perfect, of course, being the rambunctious kid. She's so kidlike.

Each is sketched out so neatly that you could ID all within moments of first on-stage appearance. Jacobs-Jenkins appropriated types from Tennessee Williams and the like: The Big Daddy (all the more powerful for havoc wreaked from beyond the grave), the long-suffering eldest, the peacemaking middle child, the black sheep baby; the angsty teen trying to discover himself, the younger teen wanting to grow up too fast, the outsider lovechild trying to save the black sheep. So it's a credit to their performances an audience can even stick with "Appropriate," being as it's both entirely derivative and starkly realistic, up to a point.

Kudos to Charles Moncrief's Addams Family meets "Hoarders" set, a one-room concoction whose dimensions and detail suggest the ramble of the plantation house, its swamp, cemetery and other spook-house elements, without seeing them. That's keyed also by Emily Phillips sensitive lighting design, and sound by Jacob Olson that adds creaks and groans and cicadas. You can practically smell the funk.

Whether anyone will want to sit through "Appropriate" at this time, when the country itself is a dysfunctional family struggling to share space and struggles, is anyone's guess. As vice-

Saturday President-elect Pence found out at "Hamilton: An American Musical" the other night, theater and art isn't always about amusement, comfort and safety. Sometimes it's prodding into dark corners just to see what turns up.

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