

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6, 2005

reviews

## 'Killer Joe'

From the opening moment when an attractive nude woman struggles to open the front door for a desperate man about to knock it down to the play's shocking final scene, Tracy Letts' "Killer Joe" grabs you by the throat and doesn't let go for an instant.

"Killer Joe" made a splash in Chicago, London and New York a few years back, and it's not hard to see why. Letts is one of those rare playwrights who actually bothers to put raw conflict and knife-edge tension into every square inch of a play. He also manages to pack plenty of sex, violence, stupidity, greed, betrayal, revenge and acid wit into this juicy black comedy. Best of all, Letts gives his damaged characters a believable psychology, and that ultimately is what makes them so compelling to watch.

The scene is a seedy trailer home on the outskirts of Dallas, where Chris Smith (Joe Sikora) and his remarried daddy, Ansel (Loren Lazerine), cook up a nasty scheme to make a quick \$50,000. The only catch is they have to have Chris' mother killed so they can collect on her life insurance policy. The beneficiary of that policy is supposedly Dottie (Corryn Cum-



theater

BY  
JAY  
REINER

venue  
Gardner Stages,  
West Hollywood  
(Through April 17)

the bottom line  
Sex, violence,  
stupidity, greed —  
what more could  
you want? Well  
done, too.

mins), Chris' unworldly virginal sister, whom he and Ansel are sure they can control.

Enter Killer Joe Cooper, a rogue Dallas detective who moonlights as a killer for hire. Joe is a fascinating creation, especially as played by Paul Dillon,

who created the part with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. The detective-killer is cool, measured and polite on the surface, but once riled he is as deadly as a cobra and twice as mean.

The play's most original twist is that coldblooded Joe, who has seen it all, and sweet-natured, naive Dottie, who scarcely has ever left the trailer, take a liking to each other. As a result, Joe makes Dottie part of the deal, bringing her in as a sexual "retainer." This leads to a strange seduction scene — but not nearly as strange as a later scene in which Joe forces Ansel's double-crossing wife, Sharla (Laura Niemi), to fellate a KFC drummer.



Paul Dillon, left, Joe Sikora, Corryn Cummins, Laura Niemi and Loren Lazerine

All of this weirdness makes good sense in terms of the way Letts has carefully crafted his multilayered characters. In fact, at the center of "Killer Joe's" dark heart is a peculiar love story about two very lost souls, Joe and Dottie, who manage to find each other, if just barely.

Director Scott Cummins ap-

pears to understand the play's material perfectly, reflected in the crackerjack performances he gets from everyone in the cast. As a bonus, he and fight choreographer Ned Mochel have put together a climactic fight scene that ends the bizarre evening with an additional touch of brilliance.

### KILLER JOE

Presented by Lost Angels Theatre Company

**Credits:** Playwright: Tracy Letts; Director/light choreographer: Scott Cummins; Set designer: Robert G. Smith; Lighting designer: Leah Allen; Costume designer: Gelareh Khaloum; Set artist: Jaret Sacrey; Fight choreographer: Ned Mochel; Sound designer: Lindsay Jones; Technical director: Elias Sanchez  
**Cast:** Killer Joe Cooper: Paul Dillon; Sharla: Laura Niemi; Chris: Joe Sikora; Dottie: Corryn Cummins; Ansel: Loren Lazerine.