

SCOTT CUMMINS *Lost Angels Theatre Company*

TENSE: *Corryn Cummins, left, Joe Sikora, Laura Niemi, Loren Lazerine and Paul Dillon in Letts' play "Killer Joe."*

[*Letts, from Page E34*]

Durant, where his parents both taught at Southeastern Oklahoma State University. Though being raised in a college town by professors doesn't sound all that hardscrabble, Letts says he was well acquainted with the wrong side of the tracks. Opting to skip college, he moved to Dallas after high school to pursue his ambition to become an actor. It was a drug- and booze-addled time in a place he calls "hell on Earth, the worst city in America."

Still, there was material to be mined. "I hung out with some unsavory guys," Letts says with a distant look. "And some of those unsavory types I liked quite a bit."

He liked them so much, in fact, that they inspired his first play. Set in a trailer home on the outskirts of Dallas, "Killer Joe" is filled exclusively with such captivating lowlifes — characters who, though morally pathetic, have a dicey charm and undeniable theatrical power.

"Early on I heard all these dire predictions of people storming out of the theater in outrage," Letts says. "None of that ever happened because we had a story and they wanted to see what happened. The last thing I ever want to do is bore anybody."

The playwright recalls his parents' reaction to the play's original production, in Evanston, Ill. "The show was going very well, and when we walked out at intermission, my father turned to me and said, 'These people don't know what's real.' What he meant was that the people buying tickets to the theater weren't necessarily aware that the world I'm writing about is a real one. In the least successful productions, it's because the people who are doing it don't embrace the idea that it's real. They try to embrace the ironic side that's commenting on the people rather than living in that world."

Letts owes his success largely to that first shoestring staging of "Killer Joe," which he produced with a number of his Chicago buddies. From there the play went to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it got picked up by London's Bush Theatre, before moving to the West End with the original non-Equity actors. "It was really cool," he says.

This blue-collar approach to the profession informs everything he does. "One of the im-

even when I was getting work in L.A., I didn't like doing it. I'd dread going to the set and just didn't like the technical stuff, the dressing-room trailers, all the strangers. Once I embraced that working in the theater is what I really wanted, a lot of good things started happening."

Splitting the difference

HOW does he find time to juggle burgeoning careers? "I don't do both at the same time," he says. "I don't write and then act. It's almost a brain thing. I'm using different sides of my brain, which is probably why I've never had any interest in acting in my own plays."

He has, however, performed in some of his favorite plays — Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie," David Mamet's "Glenngarry Glen Ross" and most recently Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" — an experience he heartily recommends to other playwrights. "I'd read 'Virginia Woolf' a hundred times and have seen the movie and productions. But until you're in it and doing it, you don't fully understand the mechanics of how Albee is taking you through that ride."

Most often compared to Mamet and Shepard, Letts detects a crucial stylistic distinction: "Because theater is a writer's medium and therefore relies primarily on language, plays quite often deal with characters who

express themselves poetically." He recognizes that for Mamet the writing is often stylized, even when the language is impoverished, and that Shepard can't resist composing great spoken arias. Letts says he's "interested in exploring people who don't have that vocabulary or access to poetry to see if there can be poetry in that — in the lack."

"When we were doing the original production of 'Killer Joe,' we encouraged the actors to fill the trailer with their personal belongings," Letts recalls. "One of the actors brought in a handful of books. I said: 'There are no books in this trailer. It's not part of their world.'"

Paul Dillon, who originated the role of Killer Joe and is reprising it for the L.A. premiere, wryly observes that "if any of the characters ever read a poem, it was on a placemat at a restaurant."

But clearly something profound keeps him returning to the play: "The damage of the people Tracy writes about is pretty vivid, and yet they're still driven to find love, feel better and ease whatever pain they have."

As Letts understands it, "Because the characters don't have the means to express themselves, they feel things really hard. And so the possibility for violence and sex is always there."

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