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## THEATER REVIEW

# 'Killer Joe' digs into seedy side of American dream

By PHILIP BRANDES  
*Special to The Times*

Playwright Tracy Letts draws his lowlife characters so skillfully from the underbelly of the American dream that it's impossible not to get caught up in their squalid exploits. Edgy, brutal and darkly hilarious, Letts' world comes vividly to life as his cult hit, "Killer Joe," makes its long overdue West Coast debut courtesy of Scott Cummins' riveting staging for Lost Angels Theatre Company.

Set in a stupendously seedy trailer home on the outskirts of Dallas, Letts' razor-sharp scripting wastes no time plunging us into the life-or-death predicament of Chris Smith (Joe Sikora), a 22-year-old drug dealer on the run over an unpaid debt.

Seeking shelter with his far-from-nurturing family, Chris enlists his clueless, destitute father Ansel (Loren Lazerine) and enthusiastically skanky mother-in-law Sharla (Laura Niemi) in a scheme to collect on his estranged mother's life insurance policy. The inconvenient hitch: Mom is still alive and kicking.

Chris' desperate solution is the titular Joe Cooper (Paul Dillon), a corrupt police detective who moonlights as a contract killer. Unable to cough up Joe's down payment, the Smiths agree to give him their virgin daughter, Dottie (Corryn Cummins), a dreamy innocent whose candlelit seduction is one of the most creepily erotic scenes ever penned for the stage.

Dillon, who originated the role of Joe and reprised it off

## 'Killer Joe'

**Where:** The Gardner Stages, 1501 Gardner St., Hollywood

**When:** 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays

**Ends:** April 17

**Price:** \$20 to \$25

**Contact:** (866) 811-4111 or [www.lostangelstheatre.com](http://www.lostangelstheatre.com)

**Running Time:** 2 hours

Broadway, is in such thorough command that not a single glance or gesture is wasted. His icy, menacing Joe can pivot on a dime from businesslike detachment to eruptions of harrowing violence, all the while forcing his

victims to obey the fine points of etiquette. Dillon makes this starkly contrasting savagery and politeness more than comedic; manners are the only structures that allow Joe to navigate his world.

Lacking even that shaky moral compass, the Smith family is guided by appetite and greed — and rendered in all its tacky splendor by this first-rate cast.

Yet their need for something more surfaces in strangely affecting moments: Chris's pangs of conscience, and the genuine bond between Joe and Dottie. Although "Killer Joe" abounds with shocking excess, its inescapable realism is built from recognizable everyday experience. Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the Smiths is that they aren't exaggerated *enough*.