

Gruesome Playground Injuries by Theatre Exile

Is this what Nietzsche had in mind?

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Rajiv Joseph's *Gruesome Playground Injuries* is a small play with a large theme. Small in the sense that it's comprised of eight short vignettes featuring only two characters, Kayleen (Charlotte Ford) and Doug (Keith Conallen); large in its notion that through suffering and pain (most often self-inflicted) Kayleen and Doug will discover either love, maturity, wholeness or redemption.

What we have here in capsule form is a dramatic representation of Nietzsche's idea that adversity is a necessary condition for self-fulfillment— in Nietzsche's words, "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." □ Throughout the play, Kayleen and Doug put this idea to the test. In its most extreme forms, Doug is struck by lightning after climbing to a roof during a thunderstorm, and Kayleen attempts to excise her stomach.

We first meet Kayleen and Doug in an elementary school infirmary when each is eight. Kayleen is there because of the real or imagined stomach ailment that will lead her, 25 years later, to attempt surgery on herself. Doug is there because he decided to ride his bike off the schoolhouse roof. Thus begin eight scenes that move forward and then backward in five-year increments, finally ending at age 38.

Each scene is linked by common elements: The dire straits of one or the other protagonist due to a "gruesome injury" □; a kind of mystical belief that each possesses healing powers over the other's wound; and banter that ranges from the acerbic (Kayleen to Doug: "You're not accident prone; you're retarded" □) to exchanges of information about what has happened to each in the intervening years, to heartfelt, loving confessions (Doug to Kayleen: "I'm not someone else; I'm you" □).

One believable scene

Both Ford and Conallen give solid, convincing performances that require each to switch rather quickly, from one scene to the next, both the age and the personality of the persons they are or were. For me the most powerful scene— the one in which it was most believable that at bottom a deep affection defines the relationship between Kayleen and Doug— is created by Ford when, as Doug lies in a coma, she discovers that his hands are dry and proceeds to rub them gently with hand lotion while saying softly, "The best things in my life were done by you." □ Positive feelings of this kind are very rare in the play.

Deborah Block's directing is firm, resulting in smooth transitions from vignette to vignette. This is most evident in prop and costume changes that the two actors make in full view of the audience. Particularly effective in suggesting the evolving relationship between the characters is the grooming behavior of the two actors as they remove blood or mud from each other during

Best scene:
Coma

these intervals.

Hopscotch and baseball

The set design, by Daniel Boylen, is appropriately *de minimus* but unfortunately is dominated by a hopscotch course on the ground and a baseball scoreboard (used to mark the changing scenes) in the background. I say "unfortunately" because these prominent features of the set suggest (especially in the case of the scoreboard) that mere games are being played rather than the playing out of existential struggles, as the play's theme would have us believe.

Negative:
hopscotch/
scoreboard=
games

This latter point brings me to the production's primary weakness. From time to time Theatre Exile selects plays that fail to match the company's high production values. This is the case with *Gruesome Playground Injuries*.

Negative:
ending

For example, the final vignette, entitled "Zamboni," brings neither dramatic nor thematic closure. Doug, who appears in a wheelchair due to his accumulated injuries at 38, forcefully instructs Kayleen not to touch him. Throughout the play, however, the healing power of touch, each by the other, has been an important motif.

Why this sudden shift? Are we supposed to believe that Doug's prior sufferings have brought about such a degree of maturity and independence that he no longer needs Kayleen? If so, nothing that has transpired prepared us or the character himself to find this plausible.

Sophie's forgotten choice

Similarly, the play's final words are spoken by Kayleen, who reminisces about an earlier time when she and Doug stayed up all night and watched a new day begin with a blue sky, as though this symbolized their future. Again, nothing that has gone before suggests this will be the case for the injured pair, either separately or together.

Finally, *Gruesome Playground Injuries* is simply too thin to take on the hefty Nietzschean theme that lies at its core. Nietzsche himself failed to adequately acknowledge that some sufferings and hardships are so extreme that rather than being transformative, they destroy the individual. Think of William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, or instances in the Bosnian Wars in which Muslim fathers were forced by Serbian soldiers to rape their daughters and castrate their sons. *Gruesome Playground Injuries* elides the question of whether or not the injuries of Doug and Kayleen fall into this destructive category.

In Nietzsche's view, suffering and violence don't automatically lead to self-mastery or redemption. Rather, individuals who suffer must possess the ability "to sublimate, to spiritualize, to sanctify, or to raise to fruitfulness" the bad that has happened to them. The characters we encounter in this play simply don't measure up to the task that its theme imposes on them.

Theatre Exile is to be commended for bringing edgy plays to Philadelphia's theatrical audiences. Unfortunately, too many plays of this sort are not worthy of the considerable talents possessed by this company.