

'Gruesome Playground Injuries': Emotional, physical wounds both run deep

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What: Ensemble Theatre presents the regional premiere of the play by Rajiv Joseph, directed by Fred Sternfeld.

When: Through Sunday, May 20.

Where: 2843 Washington Blvd., Cleveland Heights.

Tickets: \$10 (students) to \$20. Go to ensemble-theatre.org or call 216-321-2930.

"Gruesome Playground Injuries," by Cleveland Heights native Rajiv Joseph, is the sort of work that lodges in your brain like a piece of shrapnel, an image that the accident-prone Romeo and masochistic Juliet at the center of this blood-soaked love story would no doubt appreciate.

TOXIC

The play follows Doug (Dan Folino) and Kayleen (artistic director Celeste Cosentino) through 30 years of increasingly toxic misadventures -- from twisted ankles and pink eye to comas and suicide attempts.

Doug is a relentless spaz, Kayleen relentlessly unhappy. When they first meet on the playground at age 8, they compare maladies. Doug's head, in what will become a familiar motif, is swathed in a bloody bandage. "I broke my face," he gleefully announces to Kayleen, "playing Evel Knievel" by riding a bike off the school roof.

For her part, Kayleen has a stomachache. "My mom says it's because I have bad thoughts," she says.

Soon, they are comparing past calamities, and in a gross-out moment of intimacy, Kayleen asks Doug to lift the gauze so she can touch his oozing gash.

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Kayleen "lays hands" on Doug to "heal him" throughout the erratic chronology of their relationship -- in one scene they might be 23; in the next, 13 -- imbuing the work with a visceral religiosity, like Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," only filled with humor, pathos and self-awareness.

When the lights fade on the opening scene, the actors retreat to their "rooms" on opposite sides of the stage and, as "I'm Not Okay (I Promise)" by My Chemical Romance tears through the space, they change costumes, brush their hair and apply makeup in full view of the audience.

(This ritual is repeated with each new scene, accompanied by a tune appropriate to the decade and mood, from the Violent Femmes' cheeky ode to lost love, "Gone Daddy Gone," to Adele's song to slit your wrists by, "Someone Like You.")

"song to slit your wrists by" Really?

These intervals are mesmerizing; they foreshadow horrific injuries to come -- look, Doug's white Oxford is smeared with blood; why is Kayleen rubbing dirt on her calf? -- and make ghoulish voyeurs of us all. Like Doug and Kayleen, we can't wait to see the glistening new wounds.

In Scene 2, the pair are in a hospital, a favorite meeting place of the star-crossed, likely uninsurable couple, 15 years after Doug sailed off that roof. Now, he's lost a tooth -- and the sight in one eye.

Do they really like meeting there?

"The fireworks were awesome," he tells a visiting Kayleen.

Both are damaged goods, inside and out -- but despite the fact that they are clearly tortured soul mates, they keep floating away from each other. No other people ever appear, so their chemistry is key.

Clearly? Are they soulmates?

As Doug, Folino is flat-out great, a whirling dervish of weird, his disturbed energy flying in every direction as he tries to pull Kayleen into his progressively more desperate and violent orbit.

But Cosentino plays Kayleen with an all-consuming glumness, an affect that might be clinically dead-on for the depressive Kayleen. Onstage, though, she just comes off as inert, giving Folino's bouncing, schizoid charisma nowhere to go.

Cosentino is a gifted director who has coaxed more compelling performances out of her own actors this season. But as it stands, this chemically imbalanced romance is too much of a one-man show, more gruesome and less playground than even Joseph intended.

Are they uninsured?