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Theater review: Yockey's 'Pluto' describes a world out of alignment

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Posted: 6:51 p.m. Monday, Nov. 4, 2013



BY WENDELL BROCK - FOR THE AJC

For most of the 80 minutes of "Pluto," the sad and unsettling new play by Steve Yockey at Actor's Express, it is 9:30 a.m.

Though the story would seem to occur in an ordinary kitchen where a single mother tiptoes her way around the challenges of grocery-shopping and speaking to her teenage son, it happens in a strangely altered time zone where quotidian details like radios, refrigerators and dogs are guided by their own cosmic logic.

It's a morning that wants to be just like any other day but never can be.



Stephanie Friedman, as Maxine, and Wyatt Fenner, as Bailey, are in Steve Yockey's "Pluto" at Actor's Express, through Nov. 24. CONTRIBUTED ... [Read More](#)

It's a day when the failure of love and brain chemistry turns into chaos for a boy, a mother, a town.

In describing the tormented teenager, Bailey (Wyatt Fenner), his mother (Kathleen Wattis) and the mysterious visitors who crash-land at their breakfast table, Yockey takes us to queasy, uncomfortable and highly complex emotional places. Imbuing his ripped-from-the-headlines material with the horrific impulse of Tracy Letts and Martin McDonagh – with a dash of

Tony Kushner's hushed and prophetic intelligence – Yockey delivers an American tragedy as important as it is disturbing.

Directed by Melissa Foulger, this world premiere finds the Atlanta-grown, Los Angeles-based playwright investigating the terrain of Columbine and Newtown with atom-splitting intimacy. Yockey may have social ills and planetary nomenclature in mind. But at its core, "Pluto" is about the less-than-heavenly workings of the human heart: relationships mapped by love, death, cruelty, hurt and terror.

The absence of communication between parents and children can be a cliché. Here, it is the mostly successful impetus for the discussion of

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Kathleen Wattis and Wyatt Fenner play mother and son and Joe Sykes portrays The Suave Reaper in Steve Yockey's "Pluto" at ... [Read More](#)

Pop-Tarts and other petty (or grave) topics that transpires around a family breakfast table. Something has become dangerously unglued here – as evidenced by the flowering redbud branch that has crashed through the ceiling; the prescient, three-headed dog (played by Alison Hastings); whatever it is that keeps jolting the refrigerator and flipping the radio on and off.

And make no mistake, gentle hearts:
Over the course of this blood-splattered one act, things will get considerably worse.

Yockey sows just enough seeds to keep us guessing about what is to be reaped. He then scrambles with the appearance of the supremely mean Maxine (Stephanie Friedman). A couple of small issues: Though we get enough information to understand Bailey's motives, after all is said and done, I think his final soliloquy could be more compelling and authentic. I also think the character of the dog could have been funnier.

While Wattis, Friedman and Joe Sykes are all quite good, Fenner pierces the heart. And as for the coolly mysterious character played by Sykes, a man who speaks in the ministering Orson Welles-like tones of a golden age television personality, let's just call him The Suave Reaper.

On the design side, Kat Conley's set, Daniel Polk's lighting and Isabel and Moriah Curley-Clay's costumes all serve the tale, and though the gore design is not credited in the program, it is splendid.

Often when we leave a movie or a play feeling emotionally discombobulated, our impulse is to get mad – at the writer, the director, the actors. How dare they upset us so! Such a response is often an indicator of powerful art. Yockey assaults the numbness of the modern condition and cries out for more tenderness among mortals. And while I admire the fact that "Pluto" is not preachy or overtly message-y, I'll just go ahead and say it: A little gun control might not be a bad idea, either. Otherwise, it will always be 9:30 somewhere.

And so I leave you with a warning: This is not Yockey writing in the sexually sinister, frequently delicious style of "Wolves" and "Octopus." It is much more potent cup o' joe. Not everyone will want to see this play. Those who do may never be the same again.

THEATER REVIEW

"Pluto"

Grade: A-

8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays. 2 p.m. Sundays. Through Nov. 24. \$26-\$45. Actor's Express, 887 W. Marietta St. N.W., Suite J-107, Atlanta. 404-607-7469, actors-express.com.

Bottom line: Hard to watch, but no less important.

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