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Review: 'Ripe Frenzy,' a play about a school shooting, provokes thought with lyricism and restraint



Mothers played by, from left, Melody Butiu, Elizabeth Ann Bennett and Renée-Marie Brewster gather in "Ripe Frenzy" at the Greenway Court Theatre. (Michael Lamont)

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STAFF WRITER

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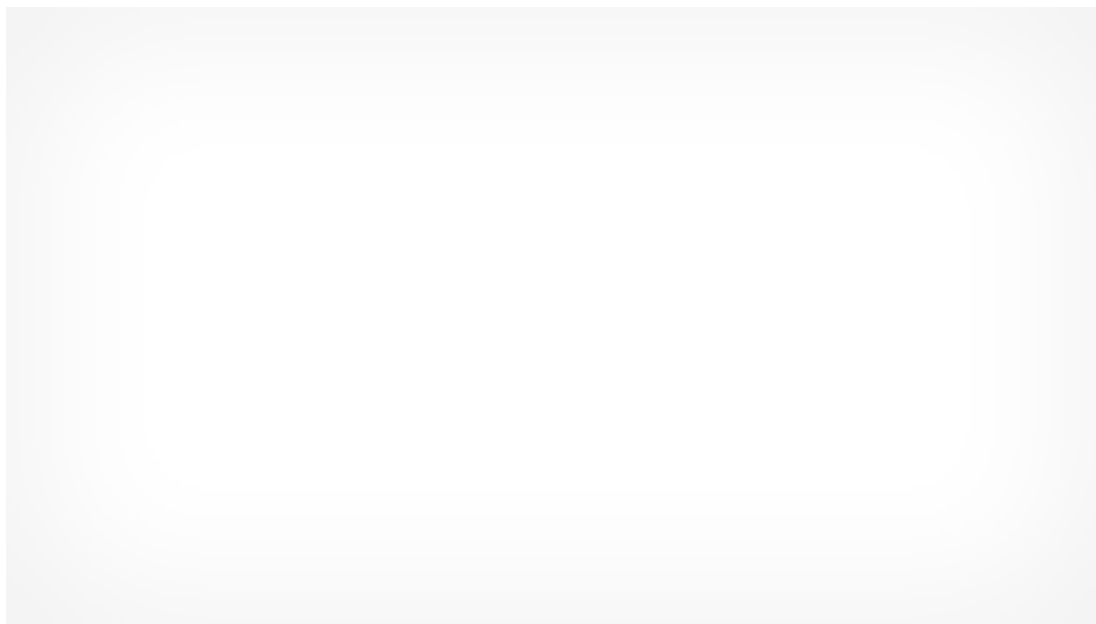
What inspires a play?

For “Ripe Frenzy,” a new drama about a school shooting, the genesis included:

The quintessentially American play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder;

The manifestoes and other documentation that mass shooters have left behind;

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The memoir “A Mother’s Reckoning” by Sue Klebold, mother of one of the shooters at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999;

The killing of television reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward during a live broadcast in Moneta, Va., in 2015, which also was recorded via GoPro-style camera worn by the shooter;

The mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., in 2012; at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., in 2016; and at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., earlier this year, to name but a few.

Playwright Jennifer Barclay, who is also a theater instructor at the University of Maryland, was a new mother when Newtown happened. Two years ago she began

writing “Ripe Frenzy,” prompted by colleague Jared Mezzocchi, a multimedia designer, who wondered whether news and social media are helping to perpetuate violence by disseminating horrifically titillating material.

Now her play is being introduced in a three-city series of premieres coordinated through the National New Play Network. The Parkland shootings happened just days before the first opening, and Friday’s killings at a Santa Fe, Texas, high school, occurred the day before the Los Angeles debut at Greenway Court Theatre in the Fairfax district.

Under any circumstances, this powerful piece is bound to hit hard. In Saturday’s charged atmosphere, it was delivered with tears on stage and sniffles in the audience.

The Greenway Arts Alliance presentation builds to this level with restraint, lyricism and even beauty.

The audience enters a haunted yet sacred space: a high school auditorium where scenic elements for a school production of “Our Town” occupy the stage. Verisimilitude is heightened at Greenway because it occupies a building on the grounds of Fairfax High School.

The show begins in darkness with a spectral figure looming in a black hoodie, the red light of a mini camera glowing on his forehead. He disappears when a woman brandishes a light beam. When she realizes that we are there too, she proceeds to lay out some background.

Her small town is known for its annual school performance of “Our Town.” Way back when, she portrayed the stage manager, and she slips into that play’s manner of spoken stage directions as she describes the last days of preparation for this year’s performance.

She is determinedly cheerful, although in her introduction she mentions talk of tearing down the auditorium and that the performance made it only two-thirds of the way through.

Out of nowhere, recorded images flash onto the set around her. Frightened at first, she realizes they are there courtesy of her son, who must be up in the booth — a kid who went everywhere with a camera; who had recently grown distant and more than usually quiet; who worked tech for the production, probably feeling alone and shut out as his best friends lived a real version of “Our Town’s” youthful romance on stage in front of him.

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Soon the stage comes alive with mothers and their children in the final stages of rehearsal, a cheerful scene of hormone-distracted young people and adults trying to restore order. But as memory unfolds, the projected images shift with increasing frequency to footage of what we sense was a lead-up to tragedy.

Amanda Knehans’ simple yet magical set provides vast blank expanses for the projections, designed by Mezzocchi — who has worked on all three productions — to play across.

Director Alana Dietze calibrates the story so that as opening night approaches, a growing sense of dread shadows the characters’ rehearsal giddiness. Elizabeth Ann Bennett is a smiling, gracious hostess throughout, with Melody Butiu and Renée-Marie Brewster as her, respectively, jumpy and cool-cucumber parental cohorts. Two youthful performers, Troy Leigh-Anne Johnson and Liam Springthorpe, portray the offspring as well as other roles, with Johnson particularly touching as a socially awkward student who worshiped the narrator’s son from afar. Springthorpe is chilling as a lost, angry ghost who barks a long list of factors that have emerged in the profiles of mass shooters through the years.

Throughout rehearsals, adults and students alike are glued to their phones as details of another mass shooting reach them in push alerts. And as projections from the hometown killer’s moving camera begin to overwhelm what the narrator is trying to say, she snaps at the audience: “Why are you watching this? It gets soaked up by your brain, your body, your DNA.”

“Ripe Frenzy” is no antigun screed. Rather, it opens a door to thought.

How do we respond as mass killings accumulate, it asks without actually coming out and asking. What will we do when it happens in our town?

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‘Ripe Frenzy’

Where: Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax Ave., L. A.

When: 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 4 p.m. June 17; ends June 17

Tickets: \$15-\$34

Info: (323) 673-0544, [GreenwayCourtTheatre.org/RipeFrenzy](https://www.greenwaycourtheatre.org/ripefrenzy)

Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes; no intermission

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Daryl H. Miller

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Daryl H. Miller has been besotted with the arts since age 5, once he was old enough to sing with the church youth choir, and has yet to top the thrill of portraying Billy Bigelow in his rural high school's production of "Carousel." He has been covering the arts in Southern California for three decades for the Los Angeles Times, Daily News, LA Weekly, Orange County Register and other publications. He is also a copy editor.

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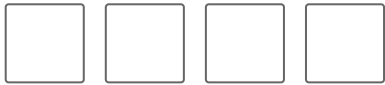
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