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Why Torture Is Right

THEATER REVIEW: *Why Torture Is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them*

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Deranged families, Republican dogma ratcheted up to dangerous heights, a first date from hell at (wait for it) Hooters — now this is my kind of holiday show. It may not be yours, of course. But starting with the syntactically haywire title, Christopher Durang's *Why Torture Is Wrong, and*

the People Who Love Them, on stage now via **New City Stage Co.**, is a hilarious return to form for the quirky playwright. It's irreverent, it's crazy, it's ... well, I think it's heartwarming.

Felicity has had better days. After a night of drinking and god-knows-what, she's just awakened next to a man she's never met. It turns out they're married, and his name is Zamir. He's sometimes endearing, more often prickly, and Felicity wonders if he's a terrorist. Is he? Not entirely clear ("It's Irish," Zamir says of his name, when Felicity asks about it). But Leonard, Felicity's father, is convinced from the get-go. (Of course, when it comes to secret lives, Zamir has nothing on Leonard, who regularly absents himself from family life to tend to his butterfly collection.) As for Luella, Felicity's mother, she'd probably prefer a more conventional home life — that is, in the infrequent moments she's able to focus on the present.

The above is about as close to a plot summary as I can offer — not only because I don't want to give away the surprises, but because there's not much of a story. Durang's world of wacky comedy fueled by outrage and pain, familiar from plays like *Beyond Therapy*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* and *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, has never followed orthodox dramaturgy, as his fans and critics point out with equal fervor. Audiences have to take it as it comes.

For me, that's part of the joy. Durang is both a playwright and an actor of delightfully offbeat charm, but in recent years he's written less — and some of the later work (*Miss Witherspoon* in particular) seems to reach out for deeper meaning. Ordinarily, one might call this maturity, but to me a few of the recent plays lacked the brio of old.

I'm happy to report it's all back in *Torture*. It's as if the Bush Doctrine has refueled Durang's creative tanks. (At least it was good for something.)

One of my favorite Durang tricks is the stream-of-consciousness non sequiturs that flow through the dialogue. Here, Luella is given to musing on the theater, and one of her monologues — about Tom Stoppard's *Coast of Utopia* trilogy — had me laughing so hard I think I missed the next five minutes. This was delivered by Marcia Saunders, in a superb performance that captured the essence of Luella, a doting mom from Maplewood, N.J., in all her sadomasochistic glory. Equally fine was Paul Nolan's gleeful Leonard, and there was stellar support from Russ Widdall as a minister/porn filmmaker, Sonja Robson as a Southern matron/amateur spy and Ed Swidey as ... well, I don't know quite what he is. (See, I told you this doesn't make sense. Just go with it.)

Sam Henderson (Zamir) has exactly the right unpredictable mix of sweet and scary. Ginger Dayle (Felicity) is properly hapless, but she lacks the turn-on-a-dime range that's so necessary in Durang. Director Michael Brophy's production is generally fine, though it sometimes lacks a degree of sharpness, and is slowed down by scene changes (they're necessary, but so is speed).

Ultimately, *Torture* is a special piece for specialized tastes — but no Durang fan should miss it.

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Through Jan. 8, 2012, \$24-\$26, New City Stage Co. at the Adrienne, 2030 Sansom St., 215-563-7500, newcitystage.org