

# Review: square product theatre's 'The House of Yes'

By Mark Collins

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**3 stars**

Wendy MacLeod's 1990 one-act play "The House of Yes" combines privilege, cultural icons, violence and eroticism into a darkly comic cocktail that would make Sigmund Freud squirm in his leather chair.

Square product theatre's production, directed by Charlotte Brecht Munn, finds an uneasy balance between the story's dark humor and darker tragedy. It walks a tightrope, sometimes leaning toward comedy, sometimes falling into discomfoting territory.

It's a play whose impact partially depends on surprise. But it doesn't give things away to let you know it's set in the home of the Pascals in uppity suburban Washington, D. C., where Mrs. Pascal (a commanding Mary-Laurence Bevington) lives with daughter Jackie-O (Emily K. Harrison) and son Anthony (a sweet and manipulative turn by Aaron Jennejahn).

A self-help guru once explained that dysfunctional families hang in balance like an asymmetrical mobile. The passive-aggressive family member balances the rageaholic, who balances the addictive behaviors of another, who balances against the narcissism of another.

The Pascals are a case study in dysfunction. Insulated from much of the world by their social standing, they live by their own screwy rules. Jackie-O, wrist-banded from what appears to be a recent suicide attempt, fancies herself JFK's wife. Anthony, the youngest child, is without personal boundaries. Mom oversees her crazy brood with stiffened jaw and a stiffer drink.

When drinks are served, the family opts for a white wine called Liebfraumilch, which is German for "blessed mother's milk." That tells us something about Mom's style.

When Jackie-O's twin brother, Marty (a sad-eyed and vulnerable Mark Hatfield), comes for a Thanksgiving visit from New York City, he brings his new fiancée, Lesly (a smiling-through-the-wounds Meridith Crosley). That sets the Pascals' precarious mobile twirling wildly out of balance.

Despite the fact that MacLeod's story invites us into the living room of a messed-up American family, the play -- which was made into a movie in 1997 -- isn't particularly poignant. The tone is too biting, its real subject matter too obscure. It's more of a study on fetishes that can spring from strong imagery -- in this case, JFK's assassination -- than a personal story.

The square product show boasts strong performances by its cast. Most representative is Harrison, who is captivating as the deeply troubled Jackie-O. She plays it broadly while still making her character believable. Harrison tells us all we need to understand about Jackie-O, and the play, when she screams -- half in horror, half in delight -- upon meeting Marty's beau for the first time.

The production takes advantage of some of the technical capabilities at the ATLAS Black Box performance space in the basement of CU's ATLAS building, as different perspectives of the action on stage are projected onto screens above the stage.

From the audience, the show's perspectives sometimes elicit sharp laughs -- the kind that burst out of you unexpectedly -- and other times an uneasiness filters through the theater as the story twists and turns. Mostly, what's funny and what's disturbing blend together.

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