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## Play: *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel*

by Glenn Arbery



On the second night of my honeymoon, I sat up in terror from a sound sleep. When my wife asked what was the matter, I told her I'd had a nightmare. I was late to football practice, and Coach Pitts was mad. To say this amused her would understate the case. I was in my late 20s, a decade out of high school, and 1,100 miles from the town in middle Georgia where I grew up. But standing there in my psyche, holding a white plastic foam cup full of tobacco spit, was my high school football coach.

*Sorry, Coach, I guess I was having too much fun.*

How could my wife, who grew up in Chicago and went to an all-girls Catholic prep school, possibly understand that for anybody who ever played football under him, Dan Pitts remains an ineradicable part of who they are and who they will never be? He had a square jaw, a gift for satirical raillery, a total fearlessness (except about being out-prepared), and an intensity that never wavered. What overawed you was his authority, an air of command so unquestioned that you had to joke in his presence just to get a little air.

Memories of football—half glory, half dread—stirred again when I read Steven Walters' play *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel*. Second Thought Theatre, where Walters is the resident playwright, premieres the play this month, having lost about half of its regulars (including, most recently, Joey Oglesby and Walters himself) to NBC's *Friday Night Lights*. The play centers on Weldon Brown, the laconic 35-year-old head coach at a high school in an unnamed Texas town. He's been arrested for double aggravated murder, statutory rape, two counts of assaulting a police officer, and theft of city property. The central deed was witnessed by a couple of dozen people. As one of the police officers questioning him puts it, "I'm thinkin' a man murders his star quarterback in the middle of playoffs, he musta done it for a pretty goddamn good reason." The other death Brown caused (a boy not even on the team per se, but on the bell crew) was unintended. Brown's motive centers on beautiful 16-year-old Lissie, with whom he is later arrested at the Mardi Gras Motel, somewhere on Highway 6. In the first scene, Brown and Lissie are lounging around in the motel room in their underwear.

But, listen, it isn't what you think.

The 26-year-old Walters structures his play, sometimes plausibly, sometimes not, around the actions of a man who irrationally does terrible things for the best of reasons (contradiction intended) and then won't speak up to explain why because it would reveal too much. In the reading of it, *Snake Eyes* feels less like realism and more like a dark fantasia on figures of Texas myth and television—the football coach, the ripe nymphet, the star quarterback, the small-town policeman, the smart girl lawyer. I'm betting that with a few tweaks it works well onstage. Walters conceived of it years ago, just out of Baylor, when Mike Schraeder, another of Second Thought's accomplished young actors, suggested a play about "a statutory relationship." But the football part comes directly out of his experience growing up in Fort Worth, as well as his current participation—stalled by the writers' strike when I talk to him in mid-January—on *Friday Night Lights*.

At the time, Walters had appeared in six episodes as Glenn Reed, a science teacher who has to take over some of the high school counseling duties of Tami Taylor (Connie Britton), wife of Coach Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler), while she's out on maternity leave. Reed has a sense of humor that Tami Taylor doesn't quite get at first, maybe because she's used to the coach and his football brethren, not Reed's variety of nervous, quicksilver intelligence. Tall, sweet-faced as an angel in a medieval fresco, he's a little milky around the muscles, but he gradually becomes her confidante as her husband's absence weighs on her—which causes a few problems. "He's very close to the coach's wife, much to the coach's chagrin," Walters says. "The coach doesn't like it. He's sort of jealous, but more so because he misses his wife than he believes that I'm actually a threat."

It's interesting to imagine what Walters might be working out between *Friday Night Lights* and *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel*. When I call him, he's in Los Angeles waiting around to see what happens with the strike. "I actually did play football when I was in middle school, and I was horrible," he says. "I was a tight end, and I caught one pass in my entire football career. I felt like an outcast, because I wasn't good at it. I felt this enormous pressure to do well, because football was like an initiation into manhood." In high school, he says, he was on the bell crew. "I rang the bell whenever we scored—which was about two times." (Not exactly Southlake Carroll, I take it.)

"There's something very Roman about football," Walters says. I absolutely agree. Football is a civil religion, only tangentially related to Christianity. Even the Lord's Prayer, gruffly barked into the center of a big huddle, is meant to fire up the team. It's less pious than superstitious—apotropaic, meant to ward off bad breaks and ugly ironies, certainly not to induce the virtues praised in the Sermon on the Mount. Nobody goes into a game prepared to love those that hate them.

The season begins in a crucible of effort—intense summer heat, two-a-days, sometimes three-a-days, at football camp. The smell of grass loses its happier associations. Wind sprints before dawn. The salt in the eyes, the bone-deep fatigue at night. Then the season comes and the players first run onto the field under the lights, that inimitable experience, and each game shines in a frame of expectation that unites a small town across races, generations, and denominational divides. One or two players might have a shot at college football, but for the rest, this is it. Why protect yourself? You play with pain. In the big games, you're like the Spartans at Thermopylae: there will never be an occasion of honor like this one. And the head coach is everything: revered if successful, reviled if not. Coaches fascinate Walters. "The hopes and dreams of the community rest in them," he says. "I think those football coaches are under an enormous amount of pressure. That's one of my favorite things about *Friday Night Lights*—the coach." And there's no question that for him, Coach Taylor has changed the way he imagines Weldon Brown. "When I'm acting in something, it always influences the writing that I do."

I think about Weldon Brown in that motel room with Lissie. "A character who does something so horrific but does it for a noble reason is a really interesting character for me," Walters says. "I think that that's what I was toying with."

Coach Pitts, I just want to say, you just wouldn't toy with that way. My imagination positively reels back from it. He was about 5-foot-8, with a square, lean build. He couldn't have weighed more than 160 pounds. He had none of that redneck malevolence you sometimes see in football coaches, but my older brother saw him get so mad at a player that he hooked him under the front panels of his shoulder pads and picked him up off the ground—a kid about 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds—and held him there until he finished screaming in his face. When I played for him he must have been about Weldon Brown's age. What he cared about wasn't girls or students per se, but whether somebody could play football. That was the measure. When he retired after 36 seasons, he had won more games than any football coach in the history of the state of Georgia, and he was inducted into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 1995.

You ask me, Weldon Brown needs a little time with Coach Pitts.

*Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel runs April 3 through 20 in the Studio Theatre at the Addison Theatre Centre and is presented in part by WaterTower Theatre . 972-450-6232. [www.watertowertheatre.org](http://www.watertowertheatre.org). Write to Glenn Arbery at [garbery@peoplenewspapers.com](mailto:garbery@peoplenewspapers.com).*