

Park Cities People

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Theater Review: *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel* Second Thought Rolls a Winner

By Glenn Arbery

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High school football dominates the imagination of small-town Texas so thoroughly that it can't be classified as a mere sport. It's a civil religion, a Friday night ritual, as 26-year-old Texas playwright Steven Walters recognizes very well — and he ought to, not least because he's recently been a regular on *Friday Night Lights*.

His play *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel* draws on familiar football mythology — the revered coach, the star quarterback, the pretty girl, the championship season — and gives it a dramatic deconstruction full of rough language and adult themes. He's undoubtedly influenced by the television show, but Walters makes this material his own, centering it on a horrific crime committed by the coach himself.

Realism isn't the point, though each scene feels real enough. It's more a meditation on the kind of character who has to do something for justice's sake without being able to explain the need.

What could make Coach Weldon Brown (Clay Yocum) kill his star quarterback in front of 23 witnesses midway through the playoffs after a 10-0 season? The boy had been like a son to him, but something the athlete did made Brown turn on him murderously, and he will not say what.

His motives become the central mystery of the play, and they have something to do with 16-year-old Lissie (Maxey Whitehead), the girl with whom Brown shares a motel room in the weeks before he's tracked down.

The action is split between the motel room on the right and the interrogation room on the left. Director Matthew Gray handles the transitions beautifully — sometimes in mid-thought — as a problem posed by young Lissie leads directly into Brown's experience with the two investigating policemen played by John S. Davies and Mike Schraeder, or something said by Brown's lawyer (Allison Tolman) sends him back to the other side.

It would be easy to make the motel scenes mere flashbacks, but *Snake Eyes* holds both actions in suspense. On each side of the partition, Brown refrains from doing or saying something that appears to be obviously to his advantage.

SNAKES EYES AT THE MARDI GRAS MOTEL

Second Thought Theatre
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With the police and his frustrated lawyer, he withholds the reason he did what he did, even as the horror of his explosive violence emerges in greater detail. Brown's assistant coach, movingly played by Ashley Wood, reveals the whole brutality of it.

On the other side, Brown staves off Lissie, who wants to do more than sleep chastely beside him. He's deeply attracted to her, and she's convinced that his reluctance stems from the fact that she's underage. But there's a great deal more to his restraint, and the beauty of it continues to



Photo: David Leggett
Lissie (Maxey Whitehead), a 16-year-old abused by her foster father, takes shelter with Coach Weldon Brown (Clay Yocum) after a murder he committed on her behalf in Steven Walters' *Snake Eyes at the Mardi Gras Motel*.

emerge.

Every performance in *Snake Eyes* could win an award. The powerful Yocum and tiny Whitehead work superbly together. Redheaded Whitehead's Lissie comes across as an abused but still essentially innocent girl, a kind of female Huck Finn, full of life and charm and a delightful, twisty-faced cunning.

Allison Tolman as the lawyer could not be better, nor could T. A. Taylor as Weldon Brown's guilt-ridden but charming drunkard of a father.