

## ‘The Strangers’ asks provocative questions

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The cast of Clarence Brown Theatre’s “The Strangers.” Each plays multiple characters: (top) Charlotte Munson, Aaron Orlov, Jeff Dickamore, Carlène Pochette; (bottom) Miguel A. Faña, Jude Carl Vincent, Emily Kicklighter and Lauren Pennline. Photo from CBT.

Just how well do we know the people we know well? It’s one of the many thoughts that comes out of the Clarence Brown Theatre-commissioned, provocative new play, “The Strangers,” by Honduran-American playwright Christopher Oscar Peña.

From the ancient Greeks, theater has never shied away from asking the difficult questions about society and social norms, or any other kind of norms, for that matter. Theater has always been a kind of mirror in which to look at ourselves.

“The Strangers” comes out of that long tradition, sheathed in a conceptual framework that is shaped by Thornton Wilder’s classic 1938 play “Our Town.” Often described as metatheatrical, a term that means drawing attention to itself, especially in the way the play is structured, in the case of “Our Town.”

But there is another, more contemporary play, John Cariani’s 2004 “Almost, Maine” to which “The Strangers” is also related. It’s an interesting coincidence that “Almost, Maine” is playing simultaneously across town at Theatre Knoxville Downtown.

Like “Almost, Maine,” “The Strangers” is played on a bare stage with only a few changing props, with each member of the cast playing multiple characters.

What separates each play from “Our Town” is the types of characters and the language they use. In “The Strangers” the F-word is used so often it quickly loses its shock value, even though theater-goers were cautioned upon entering the theater that “adult situations” and “strong language” were part of the play.

Neither play has a linear plotline that provides a thread that runs throughout the play in the conventional sense of storytelling. Both are made up of what might be called vignettes, little episodes, or story lines, some of which are semi-related, some of

which stand alone. More than one of them plays out in stages, appearing at intervals throughout the play.

One such narrative is the story of Cris, well played by Aaron Orlov, and Dave, played in equally matter-of-fact directness by Jeff Dickamore.

In many ways, Cris is an autobiographical character standing in for Peña himself. “The Strangers” features the pluralistic, multi-cultural, multi-racial society of today’s America.

The play begins with Cris, a gay man who grew up in a traditional Hispanic Catholic family, returning to a town where he used to live, in part, in hopes of finding himself. Dave comes to the airport to pick up Cris and reacquaint him with the town.

Through several spaced appearances, Cris discovers that Dave is also gay. They fall in love. The events surrounding their wedding occupy a major portion of the play’s second half.

In the second scene, Pearl, expressively played by Carlène Poshette, is receiving oral sex from Emily, played excitedly by Lauren Pennline. As we later learn, Emily’s motives are not pleasure, but attempts to boost Pearl’s courage to follow through with committing suicide.

There are too many episodes in “The Strangers” than can be talked about here, most of them about relationships that turn into something other than what they first appeared, featuring language that is both graphic and what one hears in many contexts today.

In a scene that shows us that homeless people have more of a sense of home, a sense of belonging, than most of us imagined, Emily Kicklighter’s character, is both convincing and someone many would like to know.

In another scene, Charlotte Munson, whose task is to plan Cris’ and Dave’s wedding, fills out the wedding planner’s perspective on the world.

The fictional town of Grover’s Corners in “Our Town” lacked characters in which people today can find themselves, as Peña points out in his essay about his play.

Most of “The Strangers” is spent getting to know characters that are now common in many young people’s worlds today.

But in the final scene, somewhat of a zombie apocalypse, one might come to the same conclusion as those who experience “Our Town.”

Are these real people and what is this story really about?

“The Strangers” runs through March 11. Evening performances are at 7:30 p.m. Matinee performances are at 2:30 p.m., Sunday, March 4, with a talk back with the cast following the performance, and March 11.

For tickets, call the Clarence Brown Theatre box office at 865-974-5161, or visit [www.clarencebrowntheatre.com](http://www.clarencebrowntheatre.com).