

## Review: CBT's 'She Kills Monsters' – An Enchanting Finale for Carousel Theatre

Theatre-goers have probably all heard the news—the University of Tennessee Department of Theatre and the Clarence Brown Theatre will be saying goodbye to the current incarnation of the Carousel Theatre following its current production of *She Kills Monsters*. The Carousel Theatre has been a veritable institution in the Knoxville theatre world since the 1950s and was an influence, if not a springboard, for many into future careers—including this writer. However, time brings change and the ever accelerating pace of change made it inevitable that a new facility was needed for the present and for the future. The current structure—admittedly long overdue for a rebirth—will be demolished and a new facility will rise in its place, targeted for its first productions in the Spring of 2025.



CBT's 'She Kills Monsters' in Carousel Theatre, Rachel Allion, Xitlalli Dawson, Rachel Darden, Gwyneth Doppelt, Jackson Ahern - Photo: Ella Marston

Understandably, one may feel a pang of nostalgia for a building that has come to represent more than just wood, concrete, and theatre equipment. For that reason, at first it seemed a bit strange that an ultra-contemporary play such as *She Kills Monsters* would be chosen for the final offering in the vintage Carousel Theatre. Its playwright, Qui Nguyen, was a co-founder of the Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company in New York City, a theatre organization that unabashedly trumpeted pop-culture and the term “geek theatre.” Since its first production in 2011, the popularity of *She Kills Monsters* has steadily increased to the point where it is one of the most-produced shows in school and university theatres in the United States. Its relevant themes of openness, belonging, and sexuality that bounce between reality and fantasy make it enormously appealing. As it turns out, then, *She Kills Monsters* may just have been the perfect choice for the Carousel Theatre finale as it joyously embraces a fundamental premise of successful theatre: storytelling. Don't be surprised if this storytelling sneaks up and wins you over with its cleverness and energy.

At the base of *She Kills Monsters* is the *Dungeons and Dragons* game, although thankfully, one need not have played it in order to enjoy or understand the play. After the death of her parents and 15-year old younger sister Tilly (Rachel Allion), twenty-something high school English teacher Agnes (Rachel Darden) discovers a notebook representing a D & D scenario, or “module”, that Tilly had created for herself. Having no idea that her younger sister was involved in D & D, Agnes realizes how little she knew about her sister's life, and loves. Hoping to learn more and find some form of closure, Agnes enlists the help of teenager Chuck (Jackson Ahern) as Dungeon Master, so that she may play out Tilly's game and hopefully close the gap that obviously existed between them.

Directed by Casey Sams, *She Kills Monsters* comes colorfully alive with a clever bouncing between Agnes' reality of daily life and her entry into the role-playing, fantasy world where she is able to meet her sister again and discover some

surprising facts about her. Simply, Sams' cast is uniformly terrific starting with Allion and Darden as the sisters. As it turns out, though, Tilly has patterned her game characters after her own real classmates, giving them either heroic traits or flaws that the classmates have in life. Tilly's cohorts are Kaliope (Xitalli Dawson) and Lilith (Gwyneth Doppelt), Orcus (Jordon Gatton-Bumpus), and Steve (the amusing Trevor Schmitt-Ernst), while Evil Tina (Natalie Wrigley) and Evil Gabbi (Christine Sage) are obnoxious cheerleaders in the real world.

In that real world, Agnes' friend, and guidance counselor at the high school, is Vera (the brilliant Christine Sage also taking the fantasy role of the Evil Gabbi), who is pitted against Agnes' bemused boyfriend Miles (Zachariah Lidstone).

Clearly, one of the sheer joys of this production is its masterful visual environment that serves both the real world and the fantasy one. Perhaps strange creatures occupy both, but Tilly's fantasy world is one occupied by some brilliant puppet creations (designer Morgan Matens) and performances from puppet actors Michala Plato, Ella Trisler, and Garrett Wright. Creating the environment of the fantasy world was scenic designer DJ Pike who transformed the theatre-in-the-round into a contained thrust stage arrangement. The textural environment of color, rhythm, and sound was completed by lighting designer Josh J. Mullady and sound designer Tate E. Thompson. The magnificent fantasy costumes were from M.J. Hromek. Jake Guinn choreographed the monster battles with touches of humor mixed with stage physicality.

If all this sounds baffling, that's probably a lot of the fun of this production of *She Kills Monsters*. However, deep inside the reality/fantasy conflict that is at the heart of the play, some human truths are revealed, both gently and violently. Watch out for your heart, though—you might just lose it.