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'The Book of Grace' delivers grace at Cleveland Public Theatre

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Tony Brown, The Plain Dealer
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Steve Wagner

Rod Lawrence and Sally Groth in Cleveland Public Theatre's production of Suzan-Lori Parks' "The Book of Grace."

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Brutal and beautiful might appear to be strange bedfellows, but they are apt descriptors for **Suzan-Lori Parks'** engrossing play "**The Book of Grace**" and the stunning production of it that opened over the weekend at Cleveland Public Theatre.

Parks, who won a 2002 Pulitzer Prize for "Top Dog/Underdog," has a gift for capturing humanity, in our brutality and beauty, with her glancing dialogue, people talking to each other by talking past each other.

Less cryptic and more narrative than "Top Dog," "The Book of Grace" turns on the dynamics of a family so dysfunctional and estranged it's barely a family.

Vet, a veteran of the first war against Iraq and now a U.S. Border Patrol guard, is a brute who says he's "on the good foot" with his second wife, Grace, but he's dug a

grave in the back yard as a reminder who's in charge.

Grace is by all appearances his doormat, but she slowly reveals herself to be person of desires and of substance, longing for a red dress in a department store window, and having a voracious sexual appetite and a secret volume of rebelliously poetic observations under the floorboards.

Into this little world enters Buddy, who unlike Grace and Vet, is black. He returns after 15 years, and after serving in Persian Gulf II, with vengeance in mind and a grenade in pocket, to a set right some ancient wrong -- but whether real or perceived is never made clear.

Although a kitchen sink is involved, this is no throw-back to **1950s-era domestic plays**.

These characters are meant to be real people, but they are also symbols for America and its boundaries. Vet sees borders everywhere, on his TV, in the creases he irons in his uniform trousers, even in that hole.

Review: 'The Book of Grace'

What: Cleveland Public Theatre presents the play by Suzan-Lori Parks, directed by Sheffia Randall Dooley.

When: Through Saturday, Oct. 16.

Where: 6415 Detroit Ave.

Tickets: \$10-\$25; [cptonline.org](#) or call 216-631-2727.

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The CPT production, the first since the play premiered in New York earlier this year, is directed with a haunting touch, but with both feet planted firmly in reality, by [Sheffia Randall Dooley](#).

She gets assists from set and lighting designer [Trad A Burns](#), who encloses everything in fencing and provides a functional stove and sink, and from a cast that performs as if intent on outdoing each other and eliciting from each other their best work.

Rod Lawrence quivers with pent-up rage as the literally ready-to-explode Buddy. He gets his chance to shine when he faces his own camcorder to document, mass murderer style, what he believes to be his final words before setting off to claim fame and infamy and revenge.

As Vet, veteran Cleveland area actor Chuck Kartali -- in a role at polar opposites with [the dad in the Cleveland Play House's long-running "A Christmas Story"](#) -- expresses his own rage with simple acts. Kartali tells us more with the spray button on an electric iron and few clipped words than many another actor could with wild gestures and paragraphs of prose.

As fine as those two performances are, [Sally Groth's](#) Grace mesmerizing presence here. Seductive, poetic, trembling to make her escape, she is both spell-binding and liberating, completely lost in the moment and yet able to transport us miles from this world to the great beyond of human experience. This is wow time.

The play occasionally makes its argument too neatly (and life is never neat). And the ending, both in the writing and staging, verges toward the mawkish.

But "The Book of Grace" is one of those rare theatrical experiences -- a rare experience of any kind -- that leave one forever graced for having had it.

Want an alternative view? [Click here for local critic Roy Berko's review](#).

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