

ENTERTAINMENT

‘House of Gold’ eyes culture through lens of JonBenet Ramsey case

By Adam Goldstein for **DAILY CAMERA**

July 29, 2017 at 12:23 pm

If you go

What: square product theatre’s production of “House of Gold”

When: Through Aug. 12

Where: ATLAS Black Box Theater, 1125 18th St., University of Colorado, Boulder

Cost: \$16-\$22; \$15 on Aug. 7

More info: squareproducttheatre.org

The death of JonBenét Ramsey has long carried the weight of allegory in the American popular imagination. The tragedy has always seemed to carry deeper implications about American society – its standards of feminine beauty, its cultural mores and its unending appetite for violence and sexual exploitation.

Playwright Greg Moss unabashedly mines these themes in “House of Gold,” a modernist and abstract exploration of the Ramsey case that’s currently running at the ATLAS black box theater on the University of Colorado Boulder campus. Here, Moss isn’t so much concerned with the specific details of the Ramsey case; the piece instead draws on the most general features of Ramsey’s tragic story to confront uncomfortable themes about contemporary society.

Even so, the abstraction in Moss’ text and in the current production by the square product theatre company only goes so far. The main focus of the show is a young beauty pageant queen named JonBenét Ramsey, a character with a very real namesake who had very real, human roots in the Boulder community.

In making pertinent and important points about the exploitation of young girls in American society, Moss’ text and the current square product theatre production sometimes loses sight of the innocent individual at the center of it all. Amid questions about over-sexualization, parental negligence and the role of privilege, the play frequently pushes the line when it comes to respect for the dead, a trespass that seems to go against the purported artistic mission of the piece. The show crosses some uncomfortable lines in making its valid points.

The square product theatre company’s current production, directed and designed by Gleason Bauer, never shies away from the most discomfiting aspects of Moss’ text. A young pageant queen named JonBenét Ramsey (Emily K. Harrison) moves from narrative vignette to narrative vignette in the show. She deals with the pressures of soulless, overbearing parental figures (played by Andrew Horsford and Michelle Moore and named simply Man and Woman in the program).

She faces a barrage of sexual pressures from all corners, including from an abductor named simply Joe (Andy Seracuse) who lures her to his basement, and even a detective (Jesse Wardack) investigating her own murder. The sexual undertones are

even present in her friendship with Jasper (Alexis Cooley), a boy scarred by bullies and uncertain of his own identity. A trio of Apollonian Boys, played by Moses Hunter, Mark Rudolph and Jacob Dorr and meant to represent “white male privilege personified, and sometimes not,” according to the program, loom in the background as constant human set pieces.

Ramsey’s interactions with these characters come in fits and starts, lending the narrative a disjointed, impressionistic quality. At the outset, the detective interrogates Horsford and Moore about the disappearance of their daughter on center stage, as Harrison, dressed only in underwear and donning a piece of tape across her mouth, looms in the wings.

The character of JonBenét Ramsey moves to the center of the action from there, taking part in vignettes, some rooted in the titular “House of Gold.” As she deals with Woman, an overbearing former beauty queen who places a ghoulish amount of pressure on the 6-year-old to succeed where she failed, and Man, a soulless banker who insists, “I want you to be apocalyptically beautiful,” the proceedings take on the feel of a hellish afterlife, where Ramsey must relive key stretches of a former existence. Jasper comments on the mood and feel of their setting, stating “I’m scared of everyone here, JonBenét.”

That feel only increases, as one scene sees her lured to a basement by Joe and another has her spread out on an autopsy table. A detective, played by Wardak, removes vital organs before Ramsey springs back to life, brightly asking for the return of her spleen, kidneys and heart. This scene, too, devolves into sexualized language and imagery.

Indeed, as the show progresses, Harrison plays the character less as an innocent girl and more as a victim of an endless stream of abuse and objectification. The action feels less rooted in reality and more in broader societal questions.

Through these narrative flashes, the production retains the multi-media aesthetic and frenetic feel that marked its debut at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., in 2010. The action shifts from narrative tableau to narrative tableau for 90 minutes; characters remain on the stage for the entire stretch, acting as living setpieces when they’re not in the spotlight. Screens around the stage beam live video streams of the action, a touch that gives the proceedings the feel of evidence in some larger judgment. Todd Bilborough’s original music, which he performed, adds a degree of immediacy to the action.

On the whole, the effect is surreal and dreamlike — it helps remove the action from the real-life facts of the Ramsey case and place it in an allegorical framework. Bauer directs a skilled ensemble, actors that approach their roles with nuance and sensitivity. They deliver the more lyrical stretches of Moss’ text with skill, and find the most pressing questions and themes underlying the action, which can sometimes feel confused and unclear.

There are important questions here, pertinent queries into the societal factors that were at the base of a murder case that has fascinated a nation since 1996. Those broader, generalized questions of the show have their limits, however. It’s impossible to forget that there’s a real victim at the center of this story, a namesake that feels compromised and sullied for the sake of pointing out society’s tendency to compromise and sully the young and innocent.