

## **"Frozen" : A Chilling Theatrical Event**

**by Cynthia Citron  
for The Santa Monica Daily Press  
and [AIRSLA.org](http://AIRSLA.org) (radio/podcast)**

Do you think you could ever forgive a remorseless pedophile who had raped and murdered your 10-year-old daughter?

This is the question posed by Bryony Lavery in her 2004 Tony Award-winning play, "Frozen" And she answers it in most unexpected ways.

As the play opens we meet Nancy (played fretfully by Jenette Goldstein), a mother who is still awaiting the return of her runaway daughter, Rhona. It is 20 years since Rhona's disappearance, but Nancy is frozen in her yearning, unable to get on with her life. She is also frozen in the spotlight as she delivers a series of melancholy monologues on a bleak and darkened stage.

In another series of monologues we meet Agnetha (a brusque and business-like Deanne Dawson), an American psychiatrist who has come to England to study the imprisoned pedophile and serial killer, Ralph Ian Wantage. We also meet Ralph himself, a confirmed sociopath played convincingly and chillingly by Hugh Mason.

In his introductory monologue, Ralph demonstrates how he lures little girls into his van, ostensibly to amuse them with videotaped cartoons and other enticements. By the time he is caught he has used a softly charming persona to abduct and murder seven children, burying them all in a locked, secluded shed. It is to Lavery's credit that she portrays him as a nearly sympathetic character, much as he would appear to the children he cajoles into his van. He, too, is a frozen character, seemingly without anger, remorse, or guilt.

Under questioning by Agnetha, Ralph paints a portrait of an idyllic childhood in a cozy home with loving and attentive parents. It is a fantasy, of course, and Ralph soon reveals the abuses he suffered as a child, which Agnetha diagnoses as having caused physical damage to his brain. He is lacking brain connections to other human beings, she asserts, adding that the difference between a crime of evil and a crime of illness is the difference between a sin and a symptom.

Not surprisingly, Agnetha has her own issues, mostly dealing with the recent death of her married colleague and lover. There is the unspoken suspicion that his death might not have been wholly accidental. Or maybe it was.

In the end, all the frozen defenses are breached and everybody thaws. For

better or worse.

Director Billy Hayes has made a fascinating study of this oppressively grim story, with the spell-binding Hugh Mason leading the way. He is impeccably clear-spoken (does he lose points for speaking English so eloquently if he is actually English by birth?) and consistently believable.

Deanne Dawson, as the conciliatory psychiatrist, is also good, even though her role tends to be mostly expository. She is present to explain and analyze the killer's behavior; her own persona is only hinted at.

Jenette Goldstein, as the grieving mother, is a complex character not always completely understood. (And I mean that in two ways: her behavior appears somewhat inconsistent and her speech is often unintelligible). She, as the focal character, is intended to personify the frozen victim living with the ramifications of a hideous crime. But, though Goldstein is obviously a fine actress, she does not make of Nancy a very sympathetic character. In the aftermath of her daughter's abduction Nancy has turned away from her husband and rejected her younger daughter; she lives in a hell partially of her own making. She is also meant to provide periodic comic relief, but most of her humor is lost in delivery: it is either garbled by her accent or too colloquial and idiomatic to be understood by ordinary American theater-goers.

Scott Seidmans stark set, while appropriate to the mood of the play, is cheerless and dreary, offering little diversion from the recurring monologues that make up the play. In fact, it isn't until well into the nearly two-hour long play that the monologues become dialogues and the players begin to move around a bit. Even then, what little action there is takes place on a mostly darkened stage with shifting spotlights provided by lighting designer Leif Gantvoort and occasional loud noises provided by sound designer Sal Valdez.

In spite of these minor technical weaknesses, however, "Frozen" provides a gripping evening of theater and is well worth seeing. At least two of the characters are well-drawn, and all are well-acted, and the final "thaw" provides a satisfactory ending for the audience, if not necessarily for all the characters concerned.

"Frozen" will be performed Thursdays through Sundays through March 22nd at the Lillian Theatre, 1076 Lillian Way, in Hollywood. Call (323) 960-5521 or go online to [www.plays444.com/frozen](http://www.plays444.com/frozen) for reservations.

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