

Review: Party goes downhill fast in Lab's memorable 'Happy'

CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 2:41 p.m. EDT August 21, 2015



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

It's a common theme in theater: The dinner from hell. People get together for a seemingly cheerful meal, and then the knives comes out — and not just for cutting the steak.

Think "[Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?](#)" and "[God of Carnage,](#)" and you'll know what to expect from Lab Theater's newest production.

Robert Caisley's play may be called "Happy," but it's anything but that. This comedy-drama is jet-black, cynical, often funny and ultimately devastating.

The story involves the "freakishly happy" Alfred, seemingly unfazed by all that life throws in his path, who visits his best friend's apartment to have dinner and meet his much younger new girlfriend, Eva.

Dinner doesn't go well.

Eva, it turns out, is an "emotional terrorist" with a mean streak and a less-than-optimistic view of people. And actor [Stella Ruiz](#) plays her perfectly with scathing sarcasm and a permanent dark cloud of negativity.

She scoffs. She sneers. And she belittles and interrogates Alfred (Todd Fleck) with sociopathic glee from the moment she walks into the room wearing nothing but a red towel.

Eva can't help it. She's unhappy, herself, and the more she guzzles gin, the less she can keep her opinions to herself: Happy people are fakers. They're devious. It's all a sham. And she's determined to reveal the truth hiding beneath Alfred's cheerful disposition.

"I don't trust happy people," she says. "I think they're phony. I think they're hiding something."

Ruiz packs a lot into her performance, and much of it isn't even in what she says or how she says it. It's in a body language that speaks volumes.

Eva pretends to be interested in the dinner conversation, but then she starts fidgeting with her hair or her army of gin glasses accumulating on the end table. She laughs, too, but it's a total put-on: [Sarcastic](#) and without a single drop of sincerity. It's like she's making fun of the way happy people pretend to laugh. And even when she's not rolling her eyes, it's almost always implied.

Ruiz is easily the most memorable character in "Happy," but the rest of the cast does well, too.

Fleck plays Alfred with an agreeable, reserved charm, but I did wish for a little more, well, *happiness* in his performance. His artist friend Eduardo (a boisterous Patrick Day) comes off as more joyful and full of life than the man who's supposed to be "freakishly happy."

Even so, Fleck's performance gets a lot more interesting in the second act after Eva's relentless assault starts to get under his skin. He's funny, he's angry and he shows more depth than I think I've seen him display on stage before.

Rounding out the cast is Tera [Nicole Miller](#) as Alfred's late-arriving wife Melinda, who seems just as deliriously happy as her husband. But the more that Eva badgers and interrogates her dinner guests, the more we see the pain and fragility masked by Melinda's "positive attitude."

Director [Anne Dodd](#) and her cast slowly build the tension and peels away the layers to reveal an unsettling view of human happiness. That ending, in particular, packs a mighty wallop.

I also loved Dodd's stylish and stunning set: An artist's apartment with abstract paintings on the walls, Eva's weird mannequin sculptures and a gray-and-black color scheme with splashes of red — pillows, scarves, bricks — that offer a hint at the anger and other powerful emotions just waiting to be released.

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What: Lab Theater's "Happy"

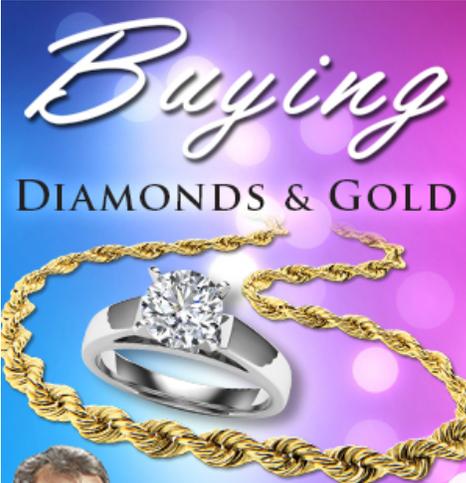
When: Now through Aug. 29. Performances are 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday with one 2 p.m. matinee on Saturday, Aug. 29.

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers.

Tickets: \$20 (\$10 for students)

Info: 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com (<http://laboratorytheaterflorida.com>)

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