

Review: 'Mr. Marmalade' visits Lab Theater



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(Photo: special to the news-press)

Lucy isn't like most 4-year-old girls. She doesn't play outside or have tea parties with her stuffed bunnies and Barbie.

Instead, she has a creepy and abusive imaginary friend named Mr. Marmalade: A briefcase-toting, cocaine-snorting businessman who pencils her in to play house and then complains the whole time about work.

Together they talk about some very un-childlike things in "Mr. Marmalade," the darkly humorous new play by the Laboratory Theater of Florida. Lucy's warped, child's-eye fantasies of marriage involve physical and mental abuse, bitterness and too-adult dialogue like this: "Why don't you touch me anymore? You haven't touched me

in weeks!" (Lucy ends up making Mr. Marmalade pinkie swear that he's not cheating).

Needless to say, Lucy's childhood apparently hasn't been a happy one. And her choice in imaginary play pals reflects her poor adult role models and her habit of watching way too much television (underscored by Lab Theater's use of TV theme songs between scenes).

This Noah Haidle play isn't everybody's toy cup of tea – whether you prefer Lucy's Earl Grey or her Darjeeling oolong. Don't come to Lab Theater unless you're ready for squirm-inducing moments involving infanticide and a toddler having sex with her adult imaginary friend (not actually shown, mercifully).

But if you revel in black humor, you'll probably love hilariously bleak lines like this one, proudly uttered by a 5-year-old who recently cut his wrists: "At the hospital, they said I was the youngest suicide attempt in all of New Jersey."

You'll also find some relatively lighthearted moments based on how kids misunderstand the things they see and hear, like the little boy who pretends to be sick and complains "I think it's my uterus!"

Actors Dana Lynn Frantz and Dallas Stobb get big laughs as a pair of kinder, gentler imaginary friends: simple-minded house plants who can't keep up their end of the conversation with the precocious Lucy (Stella Ruiz). When asked what she likes to do, Frantz's dim-witted sunflower gets a dazed look on her face and dreamily says, "I just sit in the window and look at the Sun ..."

Ruiz is good enough as the tutu-wearing Lucy – all fidgets and pouts and a tiny voice and a jet-black center. She conveys what she needs to convey and has some very funny moments in "Mr. Marmalade" (that surreal operation scene is a doozy). I just wish she'd thrown herself a little more into the role. Her acting comes off as slightly mannered, and I never completely believed in her character.

That lack of focus becomes obvious when Lucy gets a real, live play pal in suicidal kleptomaniac Larry. Connor Zerilla plays the 5-year-old with complete abandon and effortlessly projects the character's awkwardness, innocence and pure childlike enthusiasm. You really believe he's a 5-year-old boy – wrist bandages and all.

Then there's the bad guy, Mr. Marmalade, played as a James Spader-level jerk by Trevor Jack. His Marmalade is cultivated and cool, but he's also brittle and self-centered with the constant undercurrent of potential violence. He lasciviously eyeballs Lucy's trampy mother (Frantz), carries sex toys in his briefcase and regularly abuses his office assistant (a likable Michael Lee Bridges).

Director Ken Bryant could have goosed the energy level some. And funny lines occasionally fall flat because of less-than-crisp comedic timing.

But despite its flaws, "Mr. Marmalade" offers plenty of laughs for people who appreciate dark humor, even if the play's happy ending doesn't quite fit the bleakness that came before. Plus it makes you think more about what we say and do, and how children might misinterpret that in some really warped, awful ways.

If Lucy is any indication, our kids might be in trouble.

If You Go

• **What:** "Mr. Marmalade"

- **When:** Now through Aug. 30. Performances are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.
- **Where:** The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers
- **Tickets:** \$20 (\$12 for students)
- **Info:** 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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