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## City Pages Review

### Killer Smile

*The New Theatre Group*

The action opens in the aftermath of a quarrel that has nearly cleared out a surprise birthday party for a woman named Sam. Those who remain are the diehards, including high-school pal Ellen (Jeany Park) and borderline psycho Annie (Melissa Anne Murphy), who eventually, to kill time before Sam's arrival, unveil a game called "All About Sam" that pits the friends against one another to see who's closest to the birthday girl. By the end of this funny and tight hour, no one wants the distinction, and matters end with a note of malice appropriate to the dawning ambiguity that comes before. Wed 10:00 p.m. Sun 4:00 p.m. Minneapolis Theatre Garage. —

**QUINTON SKINNER**

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Matthew Everett – Fringe Blogger – [www.fringefestival.org](http://www.fringefestival.org) - Review - Killer Smile - 5 stars

**category:** 5 Star Shows - Life Altering Experience Saturday, September 8, 2007

#### [Killer Smile](#)

“I kind of overdid it with the furniture polish. There’s enough in there to kill two horses.”

I have to be honest. I wasn’t expecting to like [Killer Smile](#).

I went because I was really impressed by Brian Balcom’s work directing [How To Cheat](#) last year, a great new play that Alan Berks wrote in consultation with Brian and their two fantastic actors Emily Gunyou and Randy Reyes as the inaugural work presented by the [New Theatre Group](#). In that case, I went in not knowing exactly what to expect, just that all the people involved were good, so the end result would probably be equally good. It turned out to be one of the productions that Mom and I liked the most in the whole Fringe last year.

This time, even with Brian at the helm, and great actors like Jeany Park in the mix, I wasn’t sure. I liked meeting and talking with Steve Moulds, but I hadn’t seen or read any of his previous work. I was hoping it would be good, but here’s the premise...

“Sam is late to her surprise party. Will her friends wait or kill each other first?... a new dark comedy about the malice lurking just below our surface.”

Steve had said about the development of the play that he loves plays where people are all trapped together in the same place. I hate them.

But Steve's right. When the set-up is used correctly, it turns up the heat on all the characters in the pressure cooker. When the top blows off the thing, some great material results.

The trick is in doing it correctly. The writer's idea can't run out of steam. The actors' portrayals can't get stuck in a rut. The director has to find ways to keep the picture on stage and the interactions between the characters visually and emotionally interesting. The theater is littered with the corpses of plays and productions where everybody fails. It's why I have no patience for plays of that ilk. There are just too many bad ones out there. The audience is so far ahead of the characters and the story normally that you can't help wondering, "Why don't they just leave?" or "Why doesn't that other character ever show up?"

However, the [New Theatre Group](#) does it correctly. The reasons why these characters don't leave, and the reason why someone doesn't show up make complete sense - and they're fascinating. Everybody's operating at the top of their game here. My prejudice against the "bunch of people trapped in the same place" plot was even keeping me from rating this production honestly. I just naturally thought, "Well, it can't be a five star show. So where does that leave it?"

Thinking it over, I realized I could think of absolutely nothing wrong with the production. Not the script, not the direction, not the acting, not even the costumes or props. The only thing "wrong" with it was that it wasn't the kind of play I expected to like, and that's a silly reason to knock a show. Five stars it is, then.

Why does it work so well it completely overcomes my resistance to it? The artists involved. They knock it out of the park. Steve Moulds' script is a vicious little bit of character comedy. Stuck waiting for their friend to show up to her own surprise party, these characters have no choice but to start getting to know each other. The fact that Sam has kept her friends so completely compartmentalized is our first clue, and should be for her friends, that something weird is going on. The fact that all these friends are so bizarrely unsuited to being in the same room together starts to tell us both a lot about them, and their mutual friend. Sam has a different face, a different personality, a different emotional life, for each and every one of them. And until the night of the party, almost none of them knew that any of the rest of them even existed. Yet they are all in their own way obsessed with her, and being in her good graces.

So despite Annie (Melissa Anne Murphy) the control freak who insists on remaining in complete control of the party, and the food, at all times, a handful of diehards remain behind in the aftermath of a blow-up that, before the lights come up on the first scene, has cleared the celebration of most of its guests. Ed (Kenneth Pierce) has brought a guest, Leigh (Rose Le Tran), who he hopes will help make Sam jealous. Ellen (Jeany Park) is the strangely sullen best friend, a title that Annie keeps trying to find new ways to wrest from Ellen. The bumbling, adorable Aaron (Matt Rein) credits Sam with his recovery from addiction, but through the stories he tells of her, the audience realizes he's completely blind to the woman's true intentions. When the mysterious Rebecca (Leah Starr) finally arrives, things start getting really weird. The revelations, heartbreak, and second chances for all the characters spin the play in a totally different direction. And yet, the change in course is still grounded in character. It all makes perfect sense, and the picture of both the party guests and their guest of honor finally comes into focus. New alliances

are formed, and the final moment - now that we know everyone, and their motives - is a delightfully twisted opposite of what it looks like on the surface.

Another thing I admire about the script is how it slips in issues of race and sexuality without allowing them to hijack the play and turn it into some bland diatribe. Race and sexuality are so very personal to each of these characters that the conflict is complex and extremely human, not about ideology at all. As a result, the issues aren't resolved so much as they are put out there - and the audience has to make up their own mind how it all makes the situation (and us) both better and worse. There's red blood coursing through every line, not just evidence of an agile brain, but an agile and conflicted heart.

Here's where knowing too much about a play in advance worked to my disadvantage. They listed a character in the program that I knew full well wasn't going to show up. I didn't even notice it until now, as I was combing through the program to double check names of characters and artists. The audience coming to the show with no preconceptions would of course look at the program, expect that the production still had one more person up its sleeve, and thus would be kept in suspense to the very end, wondering when they would arrive. I did myself out of that surprise, and in doing so was approaching the play from an attitude of "ok, prove to me you're not going to suck" rather than just allowing it to unfold before me and hoping for the best. The fact that the production overcame this rather major challenge I was throwing its way makes me admire it all the more.

I'm thrilled to know that Brian Balcom is going to continue working with new writers, creating new work with great actors. Playwrights couldn't have a better ally in getting work to the stage.

You can bet I'm not going to second guess [New Theatre Group](#)'s next production. I'm just going to go.

You can see what The New Theatre Group is up to next by visiting [www.NewTheatreGroup.org](http://www.NewTheatreGroup.org)

Very Highly Recommended.