

The Second Best School Shooting



Sophie Layton (she/her)

“I’d rather be shot at The Cheesecake Factory” is a wild thing for a school shooting survivor to say.

When you’ve just survived a school shooting, possibly one of the most traumatic things a young American can experience, you wouldn’t assume jealousy to be the overriding emotion that young American would start to feel. But *The Second Best School Shooting* explores exactly that; how do two survivors of a non-lethal school shooting begin to rebuild in the shadow of another deadly attack on the exact same day.

But instead of showcasing teens shaken by the terror of what they had experienced, instead we’re shown a whiny teen & her roommate, the former pining over how unfair it is that all of the attention is off of them & doing whatever she can to recapture it, directing her trauma at...other survivors? This framing is certainly an interesting & unique one to take, but one that I cannot say left me feeling engaged, rather more perturbed.

The shock factor that this play instils is perhaps its biggest driver. From opening with an (albeit rather quiet) gunshot & cut to black, to the all-too-frequent screams from Ava that was amplified to uncomfortable levels by the echoing walls of Pleasance’s Baby Grand, the play often seeks to unnerve, doing so with brilliance & ease throughout. I also appreciated the skilful use of space; by transforming the small area into a self-contained dormitory room, it added a sense of (what should have been) comfort & safety to the narrative, juxtaposed well with the events that were playing out. The use of unseen outdoor space to vary entrances & exits is used well, adding a further dimension to this largely 2D vignette.

But, sadly, I found the characters to be incredibly grating, their lines always seeming to land slightly askew of where they may have intentioned. Shaylaren Hilton’s character in particular quickly becomes trapped in a cyclical, escalating miasma of trauma-induced jealousy & an aspiration for the limelight that betrays much of the solidarity that survivors so often have for one another, slamming the lack of attention she is receiving, not as a survivor, but as a person. Falling into the internet void of likes, shares & followers in an attempt to garner some visibility, her character struggles to remain relatable, particularly as further events begin to play out.

In contrast, Rachel DeBoer’s character doesn’t get the showtime deserved, often eclipsed by Hilton’s more outgoing role. DeBoer’s ‘moral compass’-esque role within the show often acts as a welcome grounding presence, one so dedicated to her studies despite the horrors she’s experienced that speaks to the attitudes of a desensitised nation. The two riff off of each other well at several points, but in the tussle to stand out, DeBoer is constantly facing an uphill battle.

As a Brit, I must admit that the subject matter is not one I am overly familiar with, nor would I want to assume the impact it would have on victims & survivors. But to manifest itself in the way it ultimately did was disconcerting & spoke to the underlying complications all victims & survivors must face on their road to recovery. The mixed reactions of the audience is a sign that whilst powerful, this play needs some further refining to truly hit the mark.