The Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's production of Maxwell Anderson's *The Bad Seed* is entertaining stuff, yet you might not believe more than a few words of it. The sincerity that director Jalayne Riewerts gives the piece is admirable, but also a little misguided, because the show often aims for penetrating insight and forgets why audiences love *The Bad Seed* in the first place – not for its psychology, but because of the inherent fun in watching an eight-year-old sociopath get away with murder.

In the play, young wife and mother Christine Penmark (Melissa Scott) comes to believe that her daughter, Rhoda (Hannah Waller), has drowned a fellow student, and much of the work is devoted to Christine's gradual realization that she just might have given birth to a remorseless killer. For audiences, though, there's nothing "gradual" about it – Rhoda is so aggressively chipper and inhumanly perfect that she simply *must* be psychotic. (Occasionally, however, she'll throw a temper tantrum. Then look out.) The thrill of *The Bad Seed* lies both in its staunch refusal to make this little girl adorable, and its ability to make audiences downright giddy whenever she acts out some new atrocity – we enjoy being Rhoda's co-conspirators, and simultaneously ache to wring the girl's neck.

Yet while the play's more overtly comedic bits remain intact, Richmond Hill's production treats most of Anderson's material with unwarranted solemnity. Whether it was the fault of pacing or slow line pick-ups, Thursday night's performance was too often halting and downbeat, and the play's psychological gobbledygook was handled with hallowed seriousness; we're meant to empathize with Christine, certainly, but we're also meant to *enjoy* Rhoda's monstrousness, and here, so much dramatic emphasis was placed on Christine's misery that I felt nearly *guilty* for wanting more nastiness from the show.

A few of the cast members make vivid impressions. Yet despite connecting with one another nicely, their interpretations of the material are so wildly diverse that the actors could be performing in completely different shows; depending on which character is holding our attention, *The Bad Seed* is a comedy – oftentimes an incredibly *broad* comedy – or a tragedy or a thriller, but rarely, as the material demands, a combination of the three.

I really like Melissa Scott as an actress; she's focused and believable, and appears to be truly *feeling* the lines she delivers. Scott grounds *The Bad Seed* in reality, and her go-for-broke emotional sequences deliver the goods; Christine's reunion with her father (a sweetly guarded Cal Taylor), especially, is a heartbreaker. But she never quite suggests the florid depths of madness Christine must inevitably sink to – which, considering Anderson's hysterical conception of her character, may just be a sign of the actress' mental well-being – and, in all honesty, Scott seems a bit too *sane* for this ensemble. Despite the performer's skill, her lovely, naturalistic readings don't quite gel with the others' more presentational, '50s-era portrayals.

As the fledgling psychoanalyst Monica, Diane Greenwood, with her stylized over-enunciation, pops her eyes and makes insane declarations as if they were the most rational statements in the world, and as the grieving, soused mother of Rhoda's deceased "friend," Stacy McKean sloshes about the stage with woozy hysteria and breaks up her sentences in unexpected ways; both performers add comic texture, and are big hits with the audience. (On opening night, McKean's first exit even elicited applause.) Yet the performances, enjoyable though they are, don't make much contextual sense. McKean's drunken stumblings are *too* comedic for the role – her character doesn't seem much fazed by her son's murder – and Greenwood's flightiness just makes Monica seem bizarre to the point of distraction.

There's one performance here that's pitched almost exactly right, and – wouldn't you know it? – it comes from a 10-year-old. (And a little child shall lead them, indeed.) Hannah Waller appears to be having amazing fun on the Richmond Hill stage – her blasé acceptance of Rhoda's viciousness is deeply funny and just creepy enough, and she's more than a match for the show's adults. Waller alone seems to realize that when audiences attend a production of *The Bad Seed*
, we
love
hissing at this devious little girl, and the young actress, with her frighteningly mature stare and ability to change emotions on a dime, appears more than happy to let us. At one point in the production, Monica asks, regarding Rhoda, "Isn't she perfection?", and all I could think was, "Yup. Pretty damned close."

The Bad Seed *continues Thursday through Sunday. For reservations or more information, visit (http://www.rhplayers.com)*
.