

## **PRAISE FOR SMART**

“Recommended ... terrific cast and strong direction... a metaphor for examining the aimlessness of the larger society... engaging...” – ChicagoCritic.com

“engaging performances...” – Chicago Reader

“exceptionally detailed performances... emotions that feel universal...” – Chicago Tribune

“subversive direction ... appealing (cast) ... intriguing (script)” – TimeOut Chicago

### ***Chicago Tribune***

By Nina Metz

[www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/northwest/chi-1116\\_th\\_fringenov16,0,5680106.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/northwest/chi-1116_th_fringenov16,0,5680106.story)

*the side project*, located in a burgeoning section of Rogers Park called Jarvis Square, is the kind of pocket-sized space where an audience of 30 constitutes a sellout.

To its credit, the Side Project space is flexible enough to withstand some fiddling around with the seating arrangements – a concept on full display in a pair of world premieres (one very good, the other less so) last weekend.

In Robert Fieldsteel's *Smart*, two alienated teenagers concoct a seriously flawed plan to murder for money. The premise is based on the actual murders of two Dartmouth College professors in 2001, and director Adam Webster situates the audience in a long, single line across one wall, as if collective witness to a timeline scrambled in 3-D. The story of the messed-up teens (deftly played by Ricky Gamboa and Joel Vining) is augmented by that of a psychology student who is studying the crime (Evan Linder) and his pain-in-the-neck girlfriend Cathy (Kristen Secrist), who projects all her internal dissatisfaction on the guy she's dating.

There are lots of currents running through the play, and they mostly center on the chafing that anyone – but especially an adolescent – feels when the future (and even the present) looms like a trap. As Fieldsteel points out, no matter how smart you are, some people take longer to grow up than others.

The show features some exceptionally detailed performances – J. Kingsford Goode and Steve Ratcliff play the murdered couple as well as the criminal investigators – but the play spends too much time on Cathy, who is prone to eye-rolling and faux intellectualism. She is meant to be stunted and juvenile – just like the boys in prison – but as written and performed here, she is entirely dismissible. If you can get past the issues with her character, the production unearths more than a few emotions that feel universal and unfaked. Adolescence can be a train wreck, and no one is immune.

### **Dartmouth College Murders Recounted in *Smart***

***ChicagoCritic.com***

By Randy Hardwick

[www.chicagocritic.com/html/smart.html](http://www.chicagocritic.com/html/smart.html)

#### **Recommended**

Robert Fieldsteel's *Smart*, which is now in its world premiere at *the side project*, is a psychological drama based on the 2001 murders of two Dartmouth professors by a couple of local high school boys. The murders were senseless and incredibly unplanned. In this smartly staged, fictionalized account the boys' lack of direction is a metaphor for examining the aimlessness of the larger society. Joel Vining stars as

Raymond Clay, the philosophizing mastermind of the murders; Ricardo Gamboa is his follower and pal, Stan Ferguson.

Director Adam Webster makes maximum use of the tiny Side Project space, leaving all of his actors on stage all of the time while using lights to shift scenes from the prisons where the killers are separately housed to the dorm room of sociology major Doug Fisk (Evan Linder) and girlfriend Cathy Sullivan (Kristen Secrist), to the home of Sarah and Gregory Zorn (J Kingsford Goode, Steve Ratcliff), the scene of the victims' brutal stabbing. I saw this show on its first evening of previews and there were still a couple of kinks to work out, but the rapid scene shifts moved the story along at a strong clip and I found the total effect both realistic and engaging.

For those who might be a bit squeamish about real knives – serrated navy-seal issue – in such an up-close space, the end-of-Act-One murders may be a tad unsettling. Director Webster does not shy away from the crime itself and while his portrayal of the events is more stylized than realistic, the effect is pretty graphic. Vining and Gamboa avoid the pitfall of romanticizing the killers, providing the right mix of innocence and naïveté with a generous dose of creepiness that makes the boys authentically scary. But the show aspires to be more than just a re-telling of the events. In this version, Clay is interviewed in prison by a young sociology major from the college whose own relationships consist of narcissistically using others in ways that differ from Clay's more by degree than by character. Some of the analysis is a bit tedious and the script lacks the consistency necessary to make a coherent social comment, but the plot alone is enough to engage the audience thanks to the terrific cast and strong direction. *Smart* is not the best production that I have seen from *the side project*, which is now in its eighth season; however, the up-and-coming company's reputation for strong acting and creative use of minimalist space is still intact.

### *TimeOut Chicago*

By Christopher Piatt

[www.timeout.com/chicago/article/24422/smart](http://www.timeout.com/chicago/article/24422/smart)

Of the movie role that made him a star, contract boogeyman Boris Karloff said, "The monster was the best friend I ever had." He was speaking of Dr. Frankenstein's monster, of course, a mute, lumbering killing machine who was terrifying and dramatic because we had no way of understanding what made him tick. The scariest killers will always be the ones about whom we can't know anything.

In Robert Fieldsteel's *Smart*, the playwright thinly fictionalizes the real-life 2001 murder of a crunchy academic couple on the Dartmouth campus at the hands of two, as it were, thinking man's Columbine kids. Using a college student writing a thesis on the murder as a framing device, Fieldsteel lets the murderers explain their class-conscious motives and crackpot machinations ad nauseam. Meanwhile the student's unhappy WASP girlfriend lays out every inch of her dissatisfaction over competing with psychos for his attention and—wait for it—the heavy burdens of being a legacy student on an Ivy League campus. The more the players in this fascinating story tell us about themselves, the more our fascination dwindles.

But where Fieldsteel loses us, Webster draws us back in; it's the surest and most subversive direction we've seen from him. His cast is more than appealing, particularly Goode and Ratcliff as both the well-meaning butchered couple and the bloodless government analysts investigating the crime. (And beady-eyed Vining and glassy-eyed Gamboa are convincing enough as nerveless teenage killers that they may be setting themselves up for typecasting.) With moments of split-stage action—particularly a police interrogation played simultaneously with a sex scene in a ramen-and-vodka college dorm bunk—Webster shows us what attracted him to the intriguing but didactic *Smart*. Perhaps it's because he, unlike the characters, can explain himself without talking about it.

***Chicago Reader***

By Brian Nemtusak

“Sometimes you sound like a very, very smart teenager.” The line, delivered by one half of the college couple framing this true-crime story, might well sum up the whole play. Inspired by the 2001 Dartmouth murders – a pair of high schoolers killed two professors – Robert Fieldsteel's fictionalization aims to complicate the story by giving credence to the “philosophy” of its Leopold/Loeb-lite duo. But the play's “radical” insights are sophomoric and cliched, and its characters aren't quite believable. The cast isn't too far from the kind of performances that'd pull this off, but J. Kingsford Goode and Steve Ratcliff's best-in-show portrayals are offset by Evan Linder's badness, and Kristen Secrist and Joel Vining's presentational approach dominates their otherwise engaging performances.