

# Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: Engaging and intriguing (March 30, 2012)

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## Engaging and intriguing

*'Cat's Paw' at the Dragon takes the audience to the edge*

by Jeanie K. Smith

William Mastrosimone, the playwright of Dragon Theatre's latest offering, "Cat's Paw," is better-known for his other play from the '80s, "Extremities," which was also made into an award-winning film. The two plays share a common interest in what takes human beings to the edge of sanity; what makes them go to extremes and gives them the ability to snuff out another's humanity, for the sake of a cause or survival.

Mastrosimone also likes to embed relevant political themes in his plays — in the '80s we called them "consciousness raising" — and "Cat's Paw" is no exception, arguing over water pollution. We know from the beginning that one of the characters, Victor (Louis Schilling), has taken a man into hostage as a political act — turns out to be a manager at the Environmental Protection Agency, one David Darling (Keith Sullivan). We soon learn of another move Victor's group has made in its bid for political will and attention: a suicide-bombing that has killed 27 innocent people and created havoc in the capital.

Victor alternately bullies and indulges David, as if he both detests and pities him, and David in turn tolerates his imprisonment without resistance, apparently accepting whatever fate will be meted out. Victor's colleague, Cathy (Sarah Lee), serves him as a good soldier to her commanding officer, running errands and following orders, but she is shaken by the news of her fellow soldier's suicide mission.

When Cathy brings in famed reporter Jessica Lyons (Gwen Templeton), blindfolded and handcuffed, the tension escalates over the terms of the interview and what will ultimately be revealed to the waiting world about this new terrorist group and its agenda. Victor's natural suspicion of the press and how they will slant the story is weighed against his desire to broadcast his group's mission; he and Jessica parry back and forth concerning freedom of the press, what is fact, what is truth, and who has the right to make the distinction between them.

Ultimately, all four characters have some hard choices to make, and much is left to the viewer to determine. The end is not a resolution, but a pause in Jessica's interview tape that hauntingly challenges us to decide where the truth lies and whether a violent political act is ever justifiable. The arguments against pollution are all too familiar by now; and knowing the play was written in 1986 is somewhat chilling; has anything changed to make these arguments obsolete? But the real question in the play is more of a moral conundrum, one that you may find yourself pondering long after the lights are up.

The play has gaps and inconsistencies, and sometimes muddies its own waters with tangential issues; but it's definitely intriguing for the better part of two hours.

This, in spite of an uneven and somewhat green cast. Schilling is miscast as a terrorist of any stripe; he simply doesn't have the gravitas or menace anywhere about him. But he gives it a go, and musters his best villainy for the role. His stumbling over lines opening night will hopefully clear up as the play runs.

Templeton has the requisite intensity for the reporter, but not enough detachment or chutzpah, or at least faked chutzpah, in the beginning, so there's not enough transition for her in Act Two. Still, her arguments for journalistic integrity are impassioned and believable.

Lee and Sullivan both do fine with fairly limited characters. Darling seems misdirected in his on-camera interview, but maintains a wide-eyed corporate naivety that's convincing.

Ron Gasparinetti's set is positively stunning; a fabulous construction in an intimate theater space that significantly enhances the action, both stylistically and conceptually.

**What: "Cat's Paw," by William Mastrosimone, presented by Dragon Productions**

**Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto**

**When: through April 15, Thursday-Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 2 p.m.**

**Cost: Tickets range from \$16 to \$30.**

**Info: Go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net) or call 650-493-2006.**