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## **Fertile Ground: 'Dirty Bomb' explodes the myth of the loving family**

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Dysfunctional families are a recurring theme in modern American drama. Our playwrights seem both drawn to and repulsed by the domestic battlegrounds that often overtake our dreams of familial peace and love.

In the **Fertile Ground** festival production of “**Dirty Bomb**,” author Rob Newton picks up on this preoccupation, but, with the precision of a laser-guided missile, he zeroes in on the often horribly destructive love/hate ambivalent core of many family relations.

The “Dirty Bomb” of the title is, then, not something that a nasty terrorist sneaks into one of our cities, but rather the conventionally explosive nuclear family, which emits deadly energy that spreads pain and suffering far beyond the locus of its initial detonation. We don’t need terrorists to do us in — we are doing a pretty good job on our own, Newton suggests.

In this edgy little play, the connection between the personal/familial and the social/national is very clear from the start. The play begins with a sound montage that employs a series of playfully ironic juxtapositions to sketch briefly the political, social, and cultural history of the last 50 to 60 years. With the aural context set by this prologue and a scenic environment consisting of large sections of brown butcher paper and cardboard covered with graffiti-like scrawls surrounding three sparsely represented locations (parental home, studio and outside), the dissonance of the family’s outer and the inner worlds come together.

To convey the radioactive staying power of destructive family relations, the long-term horror of this play’s dirty bomb, Nelson focuses on two troubled forty-something siblings, Karen (Elizabeth Huffman) and Jamie (Jason Glick), who wrestle with the still-taut ties that bind them to their mother, Marion. Interestingly, Marion, played by Trish Egan, is no tyrant. Despite a rigidly maintained composure and moments of lucidity, Egan’s Marion is losing connection with herself, slipping into senility. Dressed in funeral black throughout the play, she prepares to celebrate her 70th birthday by making it her last.

And there lies the problem for her emotionally disabled children. As much as they resent Marion and her intrusion into their lives, as much as they speak of how they dread her 70th birthday brunch celebration, neither seems able to cut the psychological umbilical cord and go on without her.

Both strike out in search of emotional ties that will perhaps replace those uniting them to their mom. In fact, both turn to the play’s fourth character, the very earthy, homeless Alec (Paul

Glazier), for such satisfaction. The loner Alec has sexual relations with each of the siblings as well as a brief link-up with Marion, but seems to want a shelter from the vicissitudes of street life more than a long-term emotional connection.

While Alec is neither able nor willing to give the lost siblings the succor they seek, he is, surprisingly, more sympathetic than any of the three family members. In fact, despite the underlying emotional ties that bind Karen, Jamie, and Marion, these characters with vastly different tempo-rhythms have little real sympathy for one another.

Huffman's high-strung, emotionally erratic Karen, Glick's lugubrious, self-pitying Jamie and Egan's terse, generally benumbed Marion never seem to listen to one another, never really seem to connect at all. But don't be mistaken: this inability is not a production failure but a vivid statement of the play's central point. The contradictory emotions that torment each of these characters -- especially the siblings -- leave them each completely isolated from one another and alone.

This play offers no easy solace for its characters or for its viewers, but the futility it represents is certainly cause for thought.

## "Dirty Bomb"

**When:** 12:30 p.m. Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Thursday reading: Portland Center Stage, 128 N.W. 11th Ave. Friday-Sunday shows: Conduit Dance, 918 S.W. Yamhill St.

**Tickets:** \$5 reading, \$20 shows, [www.dirtybombpdx.com](http://www.dirtybombpdx.com)