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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

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## New York Film Festival Embraces "Carnage"

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The 49th New York Film Festival kicks off with Roman Polanski's *Carnage*. It's an ideal Opening Night movie: the film contains stars for the red carpet (Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz and John C. Reilly), it's fun and light but with a patina of seriousness to reassure the audience that it's "art."

The festival itself is especially civilized. As a critic, you feel none of the tension and pressure at NYFF that you might at other, larger festivals. In a way, it's a film festival for people who can't go to film festivals. They cherry pick movies that have appeared at other fests around the world and offer them to savvy New Yorkers, the very audience that would seek out these movies at

independent cinemas if and when they got a theatrical run (as many of the films here do). It's a relaxed, ideal way to end the festival circuit. And for movie buffs, it's a good way to check the pulse of world cinema.

CARNAGE\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

Playwright Yazmina Reza specializes in boulevard comedies -- well-constructed plays with small casts and strong roles that appeal to top actors. Her most successful works are *Art* (a clever piece in which three friends bicker over one of their purchases in modern art) and now *Gods Of Carnage*, shortened for film to just *Carnage*. They're easy to over-praise and just as easy to under-praise. The glimmers of debate about deep and meaningful topics -- What is art? How do you raise children? How close are we to chaos? The importance of language -- annoy those who see her works as just slightly above sitcom level. But

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dismissing them as empty piffle ignores their genuinely solid structures and strong characters that invariably bring in top actors.

*Carnage* is no different. Two couples meet one afternoon to negotiate a "truce" over their sons, one of whom struck the other with a stick, knocking out teeth. The parents try to be polite, but as they dance around awkward differences in sensibility and parenting, the afternoon becomes tenser and tenser until tensions explode.

Jodie Foster is good as the tightly wound mother and writer who bristles at every comment of the rapacious lawyer Christoph Waltz. He's a lawyer constantly interrupting the conversation to carry on legal advice with a pharmaceutical company about bad fallout over a drug with disastrous side effects. Needless to say, the uber liberal Foster is horrified. Reilly is her working man husband (though they certainly have a very nice apartment) and Winslet is Waltz's put-upon wife with her own successful career that makes Foster and Reilly either green with jealousy or suspicious over privilege.

It's a note for note reproduction of the play, with unnecessary bookends set in a park. Actually seeing the fight between the boys and then the coda back at the park is a very bad idea that softens the real impact of the play, which is to let our imagination fill in what might have happened and watch adults descend into brutality. This is NOT about the boys and their fight so beginning and ending with them (not to mention a lame visual gag) throws the movie off.

Otherwise, Polanski nimbly keeps the action flowing with an active camera that avoids the feeling of a play captured on film. That apartment (the story essentially takes place over 80 minutes in one location) doesn't feel as claustrophobic as it might. Still, there's a certain lessening of dramatic impact without actually being trapped in that space with the couples in a live performance. The stage set managed to be more abstract, allowing *Carnage* to revel more completely in the social breakdown when the couples get out of control. That's lost a bit on film, but it's still easy entertainment with four actors having a ball digging into the lines of Reza that can definitely amuse. You'll forget it an hour after seeing it, but light entertainment and solid performances are all too rare in the theater or at the movies.

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.*

**Note:** Michael Giltz has access to free screenings of all the movies at the festival.

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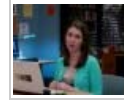


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