

# 'Bernarda Alba' explores those who uphold society's rules

7:42 PM, Oct. 3, 2011 |

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Written by

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## 'The House of Bernarda Alba'

**Where:** Shelby County Community Theatre, 801 Main St., Shelbyville, Ky.

**When:** Thursday and Sunday at 7:30 p.m., Saturday at 2:30 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$15, or \$10 for students and seniors

**Reservations:** (502) 638-2559

There's a moment in "The House of Bernarda Alba" where the title character, an imperious and controlling mother of five daughters, stands at the front door of her house and watches a mob beating a young woman who has betrayed the strict moral code of the rural village.

As she watches the scene — which takes place offstage and, therefore, in the audience's imagination — the formidable Alba shouts, "Kill her!"

In Looking for Lilit Theatre Company's production running through this weekend in Shelbyville, it's an intense moment that ends the second act.

The moment is unsettling, in part, because it's so recognizable. Even though we've come a long way in the 75 years since the play was written, stories of girls gone bad still hold a grim fascination: Think of the melodramas of Lindsay Lohan, Amy Winehouse or Casey Anthony.

For the director, Kathi E.B. Ellis, that contemporary relevance was what drew her to the play. "There's a lot of resonance," she said in a recent interview. "In terms of both how women see themselves and how society sees women."

The play takes place entirely inside Alba's house, immediately after the death of her second husband. She tells her daughters that, according to tradition, they must mourn their father — staying inside the house, dressed in black — for eight years.

Confined in the claustrophobic space, the all-female family begins to unravel. The daughters suffer as their mother forcibly suppresses their desires. Before long, they fall out over Pepe, the only male allowed to visit the house and the fiancé of the eldest daughter. Like a volatile compound, Pepe causes unpredictable and highly combustible reactions.

"It's set on one of those incredibly hot, still days where nothing moves," Ellis said. As you might expect, none of the characters feels particularly inclined to forgiveness.

"I'll just say it's a tragedy without giving away too much of the ending," the director said, smiling.

Because Pepe never appears onstage, the production showcases female actresses. Karole Spangler plays Bernarda Alba, and when she walks onstage, the rest of the characters seem to tense up with anticipation. She's a walking cloud of prideful wrath, and at any moment she can transform her cane into a weapon.

Among her daughters, Dawn Schulz plays the youngest, Adela, whose powerful infatuation with the unseen Pepe drives the play's denouement. Another daughter, Martirio (played by Natalie Fields), seems willing to help Adela at first — until it becomes clear that she has her own feelings for Pepe.

"The question all through the play is who knows what when, and who's on whose side and how are individuals going to get what they want — who's going to get what they want regardless of the consequences," Ellis said.

The Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca wrote "The House of Bernarda Alba" in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War. Two months after he finished writing it, he died while in the custody of Franco's Nationalists in Granada. The details of his killing are still uncertain — a Spanish judge recently authorized the exhumation of the writer's suspected burial place. No remains were found.

“Here was an artist, a poet, a homosexual writing plays that criticized the church, that criticized the way things have always been, and whose writing suggests that it’s OK to want to be free,” Ellis said. “When you put it in that context, the circumstances are not necessarily so mysterious.”