

Who's the victim in 'Crawlspace'?

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“Crawlspace: A True Crime Musical,” now playing at Tennessee Tech's Backdoor Playhouse fuses two very different genres and in the process unsettles them both. I wondered if a dramatic performance featuring showtunes alongside serial killer John Wayne Gacy might devolve into satire or parody, but as I found out at the production's opening night, “Crawlspace” goes in another direction.

Delivered to a nearly full room of theatregoers, the Playhouse's newest production engaged the audience's emotions with a sincerity I didn't expect.

In the program, playwright Jason Spraggins defines “Crawlspace” as historical fiction based on John Gacy's life and crimes. Directed by Mark Harry Creter, the play demands empathy for the many young men Gacy killed and the additional victims he tortured but left alive. I'm reminded that compassion wasn't always the norm, that in Gacy's day police often didn't investigate missing person reports when they involved gay people or sex workers.

At the same time, we are asked to feel for Gacy the human being, even as the play literally stages scenes where he drugs and strangles several men before burying them in his crawlspace. (Be forewarned, that will happen, and there is also a gun and suicidal ideation in this play.) Whether Gacy is worth saving hinges on whether we believe him when he says, “We're all victims.”

Act One begins as Dr. Judith Matthewson examines Gacy at the request of his lawyer, an idealist determined to get a fair hearing. “Crawlspace” imagines these conversations, where Gacy vividly recounts the abuses in his own life. If you've come to this play with curiosity about the making of a serial killer, Act One will satisfy. Act Two covers the investigation, its aftermath and the trial. The second part of the play explicitly asks thorny questions of culpability and the psychology of victimhood.

Music director Mendy Richards brings Matt Glickstein's cinematic score to life, laced with a '70s disco-funk to match that decade's high-waisted bellbottoms and delightful earth tones. In a set by Bob Cardana, the hospital's white sheets evoke the flimsiness of Gacy's psyche. These are lifted away to reveal his Summerdale living room, a garish fusion of clown paintings, your grandma's house, and amyl nitrate.

Actors Ryan Steele and Emma Olson, who play Gacy and Matthewson, are on stage for most of the two-and-a-half-hour production. A set of characters representing Gacy's multiple personalities, from Jack Hanley to Pogo the Clown, also inhabit the stage on a near-continuous basis. These are feats of endurance, and I applaud this show for the acting alone. Steele plays Gacy with his whole body, invoking swagger in one minute and pathos the next. Olson sings her heart out in "For This Devil" and "After All" and appears believably tormented.

Matthewson's character is likely based on Helen Morrison, a psychiatrist who interviewed Gacy for 50 hours at Cermak Hospital and published "My Life Among the Serial Killers," one of many books stoking public fascination with serial killers. True crime is criticized for affirming the killer's "main character" status in murder. "Crawlspace" represents the other side of the bill with the "boys of the night" and "living dead" scenes. In these moments, I questioned the sympathy I began to feel for the play's protagonist. It's a concern familiar to many true crime fans: why do "fans" exist at all?

"Crawlspace: A True Crime Musical" runs until Nov. 12 at the Backdoor Playhouse at 805 Quadrangle.

Dr. Erin Hoover is an Assistant Professor in the English department at Tennessee Tech.