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The Potential Mental Damage Done to Football Players is Explored in 'Down by Contact'

By Christine Howey

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Photo by Dale Heinen

Since we are on the cusp of a new football season, from pee-wee to pro, it is inevitable that the issue of the sport's violence and resulting medical traumas will be addressed. And well it should be, since football is, for better or worse, close to the throbbing heart of American culture.

So the fact that Playwrights Local and Dobama Theatre are presenting the world premiere of *Down by Contact*, written by local playwright Les Hunter, couldn't be timed more deftly. This is a story of Carson Kaides, a long-retired quarterback with a Super Bowl ring and a growing sense that all those tackles and blows to the head have altered his mental state.

The video in question was shared on Friday, August 6.



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This is, of course, a damned serious issue, and not just because pro football players have succumbed to the disastrous effects of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE. Even high-school ballers have died from brain injuries sustained by way of the repetitive cranial jarring that occurs in practice and during games. Those are the "slobberknockers" that have been cheered by fans and sports journalists down through the years.

However, if you're going to do a play about this subject, the trick in 2018 is to bring a new perspective to a subject that has been dealt with in movies ("Concussion") and in multiple TV documentaries and news reports. This is where Hunter's well-intentioned script struggles a bit.

Right from the beginning, we see that Carson isn't quite right, prowling around his home office, shuffling papers and glancing nervously out the window. Soon he is visited by a pal of his from the past, his favorite receiver in college named Trypp (a charming Corin B. Self), who joshes easily with Carson as they reminisce about the past.

But soon, even that interlude takes on a dark cast. And when we meet Carson's wife Kelsey, the strains really begin to show. By this time, we've noticed the tremor in Carson's hands and the way he repeats himself while also getting confused about small details, losing his way in casual conversation.

Playwright Hunter manages these revelations with admirable subtlety, not beating us over the head with Carson's symptoms. And there are interesting stretches of dialogue when the characters he has drawn come into genuine focus.

This is particularly true when, later in the 90-minute production, Carson and Kelsey's son Tommy appears in only his briefs and work shoes after a long night with his rock band. As portrayed with specific energy and purpose by Liam Stilson, Tommy is an engaging young dude who is clearly working out a lot of daddy issues.

But this is about the time when the play loses its game plan. Instead of diving more deeply into the deteriorating relationship between Carson and his family, the story arc begins to circle around itself and gets tangled up in the process.

Director Dale Heinen does what she can to sort out the players and make them all function as a unit, but ultimately the script defeats its own noble purpose by becoming unnecessarily fragmented.

When Trypp returns for another visit, which by that time we know is only occurring in Carson's battered mind, it's not at all clear what these mental hallucinations are achieving dramatically. This situation isn't helped when the attitudes of Kelsey and Tommy begin to waver as they are both attracted and repelled by Carson. Sure, their feelings toward Carson are complex, but that doesn't mean their motives and emotions have to be obscured from the audience.

As Kelsey, Marji Zitelli has a natural feel for the relationship early on. But later, when she begins transposing words in her speeches (i.e., when she's talking about their precarious financial situation, she says, "We can't the house save"), we have to wonder: Are these syntactical malaprops intentional, and if so, what do they mean?

John Busser works mightily to make Carson an empathetic figure, and mostly succeeds. Trouble is, there's nowhere to go with his character in the last half of the play. Even when his symptoms become more serious, when he burns his hand fooling around with a firecracker, the mental trials Carson is undergoing never rise to a level that justifies the play's tragic conclusion.

Down by Contact is staged in a room in a glorious Tudor mansion on the grounds of Gilmour Academy. This is justified by one line in the play referring to Kelsey wanting to live somewhere "classy." But the set, designed by Walter Boswell, seems to suffer from this environment. Carson is a man who should be surrounded by walls full of photos and memorabilia. But the walls here are virtually bare, save for a couple Post-it Notes. No doubt, the school didn't want framed photos nailed to their expensive mahogany walls.

This play actually mirrors in some ways the life of Dave Duerson, a 50-year-old Super Bowl champ with the Chicago Bears who committed suicide by shooting himself in the heart. He did so, as he explained in his suicide note, so that the league could study his brain and find out what went wrong.

But because the play never delves deeply enough into Carson's terror of his mind leaving him, and due to a garbled concluding eulogy by Tommy and Kelsey, the end result is not an emotional touchdown. It's more of a three-and-out.

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