

## **'Killing Game' a lively party**

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Sometimes you walk into a theater and by the time you get to your seat, you just know you're going to have a good time.

At Cincinnati Fringe Festival, "A Killing Game" is like that. You walk in and it's like there's a party going on.

It's not quite sensory overkill – this is low-budget Fringe entertainment, remember. But it comes close. There's cheery music and people in brightly colored costumes wandering here and there and a buzz of gossipy conversation.

Performed by dog & pony dc (as in Washington, D.C.), "A Killing Game" has greeters, too, but not in a cheesy Walmart sort of way. Actors in bright clothes stroll up and down the aisles introducing themselves, telling you to be sure to read the packet of information that you've been handed.

Oh, and if you have any questions, you should feel free to ask them. They seem sincere. Walmart should hire these guys to give their greeters Sincerity Training. It's so welcoming and so affable that you wonder when someone's going to ask you what you want to drink. But in the back of your mind, the question remains – "So why do they call this 'A Killing Game'?"

When the show starts, the seven-person cast launches into a catchy song-and-dance number. It has that catchy, cool-kid feeling like one of those Target TV ads. Remember? When they used to be really good? You always knew it was a Target ad even before you saw the logo.

This number – the eternally chirpy "Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows" – is so cheery that you half expect that Target logo to pop up any minute. You just know something's going to change.

Turns out that we – the audience – are part of a big game show about death. Not in a grim, mournful way, mind. There's too much glib banter from the shiny-suited host, Mr. Chrome (J. Argyl Plath) to allow for anything too maudlin.

Chrome leads us through a series of extended vignettes in which many of us in the theater are expected to participate.

Action Number One, called "Infection," is a mini-play about the spread of a lethal disease. The directions on my card told me that when I heard someone shout "Help Police! Help" I had to pretend to die. "Begin coughing," my card directed. "Let the coughing suffocate you, and eventually die from it."

Sound like fun? Well, actually it is. Even for me, who intensely dislikes being recruited into action. And so it went, through four more rounds: “Protection,” “Investigation,” “Information” and “Elimination.”

A couple of the routines go on a little long. You know the feeling. The scene is done but the cast doesn’t know it. At 90 minutes, this is one of the longest Fringe shows in memory. Trimming is an option.

The cast is constantly in and out of the house, helping keep a lid on the anarchy that threatens to consume the show. That’s OK, because much of the audience spends time on the stage, too. Indeed by the final scene, every single audience member is moving around the theater.

“It’s time for you to stand up and die,” Mr. Chrome tells us at the end, delivered with the pitch-perfect tone of that announcer telling us to “Come On Downwwwwn” on “The Price I Right.”

Director Colin K. Bills and his entire cast are quite brilliant in the way they recreate the mindless energy and inane blather that are the building blocks of TV game shows.

“A Killing Game” is tight and sharp and has obviously been performed a lot. You get a sense that there is nothing at all that the audience can do that they haven’t dealt with before. “A Killing Game” is zippy and chaotic and manages to be both cynical and optimistic.