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Female characters in Michigan writer's 'County Line' a study in contrasts

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From left: Julia Glander, Alissa Nordmoe, Emilio Rodriguez and Phil Powers in 'County Line' at Performance Network Theatre. / Sean Carter

By John Monaghan
Detroit Free Press
Special Writer

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The teenage heroine of "County Line" doesn't worry excessively when her father walks through the door and announces: "There might be a slight problem." Variations of this greeting are typical for Glenn (Phil Powers) at the end of the day, when he pops the tab on what's left of a six-pack and plops next to daughter Lois (Alissa Nordmoe) on the couch.

Today is more serious, though. Glenn has flipped his truck and walked away from the accident, and the half-pound bag of marijuana under the seat ensures that the single father will serve an 18-month prison term.

Lois' resulting stint in a foster home is the focus of "County Line," the fine new play by Ann Arbor's David Wells that's currently at Performance Network Theatre. It benefits from

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'County Line'

Three stars
 out of four stars
 7:30 p.m. Thu., 8 p.m. Fri., 3 & 8 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Through Feb. 16
 Performance Network Theatre
 120 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor
 734-663-0681. www.performancenetwork.org
 \$22-\$41

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downstairs when they are supposed to have separate rooms. If they touch Tanya's computer, they may end up choosing which end of an extension cord they want to get beaten with.

The good-natured Lois tries to keep her head down, but this proves difficult when Tanya prepares dinner for a schoolteacher (Powers again in the second of three roles) she has found through an online dating website. If anything goes wrong, the kids will be the ones to suffer.

Wells, who wrote the less-convincing "Brill" for Performance Network last season, mostly avoids caricature. He comes closest with Glenn, though Powers helps by bringing his trademark affability to a good-old-boy character who has a mullet and wears lots of T-shirts.

In the end, the play belongs to Glander, the veteran Detroit-area actress who perfectly embodies all of Tanya's vulnerability and nastiness. Kirk Domer's set design surrounds her with tacky collector plates and other trinkets that speak volumes about her personality. She enlists Lois to help her replace some of them with books Tanya has brought in to look smarter for her gentleman caller.

Thanks to a strong script, cast and direction by David Wolber, "County Line" delivers memorable portraits of two very different women. Lois and Tanya may be temporarily living under the same roof, but their strategies for coping with the harshness of life keep them worlds apart.

Contact John Monaghan: madjohn@earthlink.net

a sharply written script and a standout performance from Julia Glander as Tanya, a foster mom who represents evil at its most mundane.

As with the best villains, the lonely, middle-aged Tanya can be sympathetic and even charming. Employed at the truck stop across the highway, she recognizes the drivers by the sounds of their rigs.

"Bible or BS?" she asks Lois when they first meet, creating a parlor game in which she makes up words of wisdom that may or may not have come from scripture. Her back story provides Lois with yet another lesson in letting impulse trump common sense.

There is another foster kid in the house, Darius (Emilio Rodriguez), and from him, Lois gets hints that things aren't quite right. For one thing, both kids have to sleep on couches

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