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## 'Sleeping Dogs' a tense ride

by Michael Morain

Is any place more unsettling than a hospital waiting room?

The pot of stale coffee, the overstuffed couch, those nasty paintings of sunlit gardens - no amount of propriety can erase the worries at hand. And sometimes, it makes things worse.

In "Sleeping Dogs," the riveting new drama produced by Tallgrass Theatre Company, a ghastly accident brings two grieving mothers face-to-face in a hospital waiting room they'd give anything to avoid. They cling to etiquette as long as they can, but eventually, nothing can keep their anxiety from spilling over.

The show, by Des Moines playwright Robert John Ford (who wrote the successful but entirely different "Caucus: The Musical"), made its world premiere Friday and will continue through Feb. 7 at the Rex Mathes Auditorium in West Des Moines.

In some ways the story, with its unanswered questions about a deeply troubling event, plays out like a sequel to the self-help classic - call it "When Bad Things Happen to Good People ... and What It Does to Their Moms."

In this particular case, two college buddies' joy ride screeches to a halt when their car crashes into an oncoming vehicle. One dies, the other survives, and both their mothers have to pick up the pieces.

When the play begins, the survivor can't speak, he's lost an arm, and third-degree burns cover most of his body. His mother, Jean (Becky Scholtec), has already spent three long weeks at his bedside and is in no shape to deal with the surprise arrival of the other boy's mother, Fia (Preshia Paulding).

Facts about the accident reveal themselves slowly, like clues in a mystery novel or that game where players can ask only yes or no questions. Bit by bit, the truth comes out, and each revelation sends the mothers lurching.

Scholtec plays Jean, a devout and self-righteous Christian, with a cool formality that masks her character's inner turmoil and makes her occasional outbursts all the more powerful. She is the perfect foil to Paulding's freewheeling Fia, who draws strength from what she calls a "spiritual smorgasbord" of different faiths. The women's situation would be awkward for anyone, but their clashing religious views add an almost palpable layer of tension.

Both actresses have years of experience on stages around town, and it shows. They manage to teeter on the brink during most of the play, balancing restraint with just a few glimpses at the emotional abyss into which their characters could fall.

They get a boost from director Josh Vishnapu's straightforward approach and an elegant set designed by James Stephenson, but it's Ford's well-paced script that makes the 75-minute show so remarkable.

It pokes into the darker corners of the human psyche, where parents cling to idealized memories of their children and blame themselves for their kids' mistakes.

By its end, the play reveals not only the toxic power of anger but the source of its antidote: love.