

## BU's 'She Kills Monsters' is imaginative success

**Reviewed by George Basler**

*She Kills Monsters* is a play that deals with the serious topics of school bullying, adolescent anxiety and premature death in a way that's goofy, irreverent and just plain fun.

That's a difficult combination to pull off, but a production that opened Thursday (May 5) at Binghamton University does just that, thanks to a spirited cast and inventive guidance from Brian Gillespie, a New York City-based director.

American playwright Qui Nguyen places the action in both the real world and the imaginary world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, an enormously popular game in the 1990s, the time period in which the play is set.

Agnes Evans (Mary Chattin), an average 24-year-old schoolteacher, loses her parents and her 16-year-old sister, Tilly (Olivia Timmis), in a car accident. Having barely known her sister when she was alive, Agnes is mired in regret and seeks to find out more about her when she finds a *Dungeons & Dragons* notebook that Tilly had written.

Helping Agnes along the way is a D&D expert at her school, a gregarious, nerdy student, Chuck Biggs (James O'Driscoll), who leads her through Tilly's game by acting as Dungeon Master.

The game transports Agnes into a world of high adventure in which she and Tilly are joined by Tilly's crew of an elfin warrior, an Amazon, and a demon lord who would rather snack on junk food and watch television than capture souls. Together, they battle homicidal fairies, nasty monsters, maniacal cheerleaders and, ultimately, a five-headed dragon.

By playing the game, Agnes learns things about her sister that she never knew. She finds out that her sister felt so alienated and geeky that she retreated into a fantasy world where she could be a hero. She discovers that her sister struggled with her sexual identity.

The show requires a multi-dimensional production. Gillespie has done an excellent job of mixing sound effects, lighting, outlandish costumes, shadow puppetry, fantastical props and puppetry into a cohesive whole. He also keeps a tight enough rein on the student actors so their performances never become overly broad.

The production is equally successful in seamlessly executing the transitions between the real world and fantasy game world.

As Agnes, Chattin does a fine job conveying the character's transition from hesitancy to self-assurance. Timmis plays Tilly with great bravado. Both women quite effectively play the poignant moment in which Agnes realizes that she could have helped Tilly cope with her inner demons and insecurities (her own, as well) if she had just paid more attention.

Other performers in the large cast give creditable performances as well. O'Driscoll is quite funny as the geeky Dragon Master, as is Patrick Saint Ange as Agnes' befuddled boyfriend. Jessie Jean Newman-Geteler and Elizabeth Dell also stand out as two delightfully devious cheerleaders who made Tilly's life miserable in the real world but get their comeuppance in the fantasy game world.

Professional fight choreographer Jacqueline Holloway skillfully stages the numerous battle scenes. The scene in which Agnes fights the five-headed dragon, represented by a crew of students holding dragon masks, is especially striking.

And the moment when Agnes, Tilly and Tilly's crew engage in a "dance off" battle with the maniacal cheerleaders is totally enjoyable.

Gavani Bulathsinghala deserves great kudos for the show's eccentrically wonderful costumes.

The play does have some weak moments, most noticeably when Agnes interacts with the school's guidance counselor in real world. Nguyen seems to be working for comic relief in these scenes, but they just aren't funny. Instead, they're bizarre, just for the sake of being bizarre.

*She Kills Monsters'* ending may seem a bit pat and predictable as well. But its focus on issues of self-acceptance and acceptance of others is certainly welcome, especially at a time when such concepts seem under attack in some quarters.

Most importantly, though, this message is never presented in a heavy-handed way. At its best, the play is an offbeat comedy that provides a good amount of silliness and laughs.

*She Kills Monsters* is a play to enjoy.

**IF YOU GO:** *She Kills Monsters continues this weekend at 8 p.m. Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday (May 7 and 8) in the Watters Theater of Binghamton University's Fine Arts Building. Tickets at \$10 to \$20 are available at 607-777-2787, at the Anderson Center box office or by visiting [www.binghamton.edu/theatre/](http://www.binghamton.edu/theatre/)*

*The Department of Theatre strongly encourages audience members to wear masks at performances.*

By [George Basler](#) | May 7th, 2022 | [Broome Arts Mirror](#), [Review](#)

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