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THEATER REVIEW: Violence outweighs purpose of play

By Mary Burkin

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"Don't Shoot, I'm Dead Already," currently in late-night performances at Glendale's Luna Playhouse, is an earnest, sincere look at human desperation. To put it lightly, "Don't Shoot" is not the best show to see on a first date, and definitely not one for the kids.



Woman, portrayed by Brenda Hattingh, explains the significance of her doll and why she has so many issues in her life to Man, portrayed by Brantley Black, during a rehearsal of "Don't Shoot, I'm Dead Already" at Luna Playhouse in Glendale. (Alex Collins/News Press)

As a play written by an Armenian playwright in the context of Armenia's centuries of struggle with injustice, poverty and alienation, producing "Don't Shoot" in the middle of Glendale's large Armenian community makes perfect sense.

Artistic Director Aramazd Stepanian and producer Maro Parian deserve applause for attempting a production that tries to bring meaning to political and social misery. Adding to the integrity of the piece is the fact that it was written by Karine Khodikian, who just stepped down from her post as Armenia's deputy minister of culture.

But for an adventure-driven, light-hearted American audience, one that's never had to fight in the streets of Los Angeles in order to hold a free election, "Don't Shoot" is like a gruesome tale of existential horror being told at a Paris Hilton party, even if a Paris Hilton party might be your idea of something gruesomely horrific.

"Don't Shoot" is the story of a very unpleasant young Woman, living with her unseen neighbors in a state of perpetual warfare. If existentialism deals with how individuals create the meaning in their lives instead of God, then this angry young lady has created one ugly mess. As the title implies, she might as well be dead already. To make matters worse, assuming that's possible, a Man enters her apartment. And his sole purpose seems to be to force her to see how sordid her life really is, while avoiding any examination of his own vices.



Brenda Hattingh as the Woman, and Brantley Black as the Man, share credit for having the courage to portray two of the world's most miserable and unlikable people, during an hour of nonstop verbal and physical abuse.

Given the limitations of the Luna's small space, production designer Sean Harrington has done a great job of creating an apartment that is as empty and sterile as either character's soul.

However, the overall credibility of the production is seriously threatened by the fact that the characters' actions, as directed, often don't match their words. If the Woman is so paranoid that she needs four bolts and five locks on her front door, why does she open it to the Man without spending a second to see who has knocked?

If the Man's gun is a serious threat, why is it passed back and forth so often and handled so casually?

If the Man might be a thief or a rapist, why doesn't the Woman call the police the second she knows she should?

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And can't the characters communicate by looking at each other for a few brief seconds, instead of engaging in nonstop dialogue?

The answers to all these questions remain in the hands of director and translator Stepanian, and answering those questions might very well be his next noteworthy project.

Meanwhile, the Luna has earned a place on the list of Los Angeles-area theaters that are willing to ask for your passion instead of your approval.

MARY BURKIN of Burbank is an actress, playwright and Glendale lawyer.

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