

Waiting for free money and fame

The first thing to remember when attending "U.S. Drag" at the Dragon Theatre in downtown Redwood City is not to have any preconceptions of whether Gina Gionfriddo's play is a comedy, a tragedy, a mystery, a tragicomedy or none of the above.

It's probably a little bit of all of that (even the none-of-the-above part), although the mystery part might have more to do with how Gionfriddo comes up with her storylines. Ostensibly it's about the fact that there's a serial killer on the loose in New York City, and how different people react to that fact in very different ways.

Angela and Allison are the central characters, 20-somethings who graduated from college and got mind-numbing work making copies and filing for a large company, until they quit. They hate being poor, but they have almost zero aptitude for doing anything that pays more than entry-level wages, so they are unemployed and enormously unmotivated. All they really want, admits Angela in one of her frequent soliloquies of introspection, is to be given a lot of money. And fame. Yes, that, too.

While their way of speaking might seem more at home in L.A. (as Valley girls), these two fumble about, drinking incessantly, meddling around in other people's lives and talking ad nauseam (and without shame, apparently) about how much they just want someone to "give" them money.

What does all this have to do with serial killers? Wait for it -- they decide that if they can track down the killer (named Ed), they can claim the \$100,000 reward! As Angela boldly says, "We totally think we can catch him." How? They haven't a clue.

Along the way they get involved in a community advocacy organization called "S.A.F.E." (for "Stay Away from Ed"), try to hang on to a place to live by conning a needy, nerdy and neurotic stock market guy into letting them stay at his apartment in exchange for introducing him to friends and having parties (neither of which they do), and taking odd jobs like listening to (and hugging) a squirrely, fragile, hyper writer who alternates between palpable sensitivity and viciously lashing out.

But other than the two female leads, none of "U.S. Drag's" characters seems fleshed out enough to care about. Only Peter Ray Juarez as Evan, the leader of the advocacy group that creates signs saying "Don't Help" and "A Good Samaritan is a Dead Samaritan" shows some depth in his portrayal, although Josiah Frampton as the tortured writer, Chris, also some good moments.

That's why it's fortuitous that Liz Frederick, as Angela, and Olivia Haas, as Allison, are frequently marvelous. They have a nonverbal "vibe" between the two of them that makes them seem to understand each other even before they speak. Frederick, in particular, has terrific comic timing, and several times delivers (totally deadpan) the most unattractive statements while looking innocently at the audience. At Friday's opening night, theatergoers howled their appreciation.

Another hiccup with Gionfiddo's play is that it has an untold number of scene changes (at least nine in Act 1 alone). While they are done efficiently by both actors and stage hands, it certainly wrecks havoc with the continuity of understanding what the characters are doing.

Director N elle GM Gibbs keeps things moving as best she can, and her cast obliges with fast clothing changes and entrances/exits. Lance Huntley's sound is pitch perfect so that just about every word is easy to hear, and lighting by Brittany S. Mellerson is appropriately moody or bright.

It's probable the playwright wanted this story to have a minimum of scenery. If so, then scenic designer Scott Ludwig followed directions because the opening scene -- and many others -- has only one or two pieces of furniture and a few stage props.

And where did costumer Katie Barrus find those short, short, tight, tight little skirts worn by Haas and Frederick? Certainly showed off their long legs, but how they managed to sit and/or move in them is a wonder.

Whether this play will fill the bill as a satisfying piece of theater will depend on what a theatergoer expects before it starts. At its best, "U.S. Drag" shows how even the most horrific kind of event (a serial killer on the loose) can become part of the celebrity-obsessed culture of today where seeking constant amusement is everything. Flash over substance.

Your call.

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Theater

What: "U.S. Drag"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Feb. 28

Tickets: \$25-30; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net