

In ‘Soft Click of a Switch,’ stranger danger is real

A review of the intense drama “Soft Click of a Switch,” a MAP Theatre staging at West of Lenin through Sept. 28, 2013.

By Misha Berson

Seattle Times theater critic

Ever hear the one about the guy who walks into a bar, gets badgered by a weirdly aggressive, trash-talking stranger, and the two wind up building bombs together?

Maybe not in a play. But during the intense drama “Soft Click of a Switch” at West of Lenin theater, images of real-life domestic terrorism — in Boston, Oklahoma City, Atlanta — do flash through your mind.

The gripping MAP Theatre version of this obscure yet prescient 1998 one-act by Carter W. Lewis suggests a “Twilight Zone” episode penned by Edward Albee.

As in Albee’s “The Zoo Story,” two loners — here, boozy office drudge Earl (Mark Fullerton) and sinister, unemployed Ed (Brandon Ryan) — have more in common than you’d think. They strike up an odd alliance over gin and beers in a dreary joint with a berating bartender and muffled oldies booming in the background.

They play head games, edge in closer and pull back, reveal little (and unreliable) information about themselves.

Noir-style, their chance meeting is the gateway to an existential vortex.

With slanted dialogue and an absurdist streak, pretentiousness could be off the charts here. But Lewis’ lean, sardonic script, and director Peggy Gannon’s incisive direction of two razor-sharp actors, keep you off-balance and invested.

One may appreciate Ed’s rant against the giant Mall of America outside Minneapolis as a bastion of soulless consumerism. Then you think of the recent bloody attack on a Kenyan mall.

The men’s voyeuristic obsession with a housebound pair of neighbors is creepy, but also sad.

And what triggers the drastic action Ed and Earl eventually take? Surely not religious or political fanaticism. Maybe just a desperate need “to do something” — something that gives meaning to their marginal existence? Discuss.

“Soft Click of a Switch” cops out a bit at the end, with a Rod Serling-ish touch of sci-fi. But it gets under your skin as a study in American alienation, and a quick plunge into that festering swamp of loneliness and rage that can breed random acts of destruction.

Fullerton’s disaffected Earl and Ryan’s immature, mercurial Ed are perfectly partnered in the play’s tightrope dance of codependency. And hats off to Shane Regan, for an eerie soundscape that shreds and swells throughout.