

Theater

'The Glory of Living': Running on Empty in America

By CELIA WREN
Special to The Washington Post

In many theater circles, television is about as popular as Satan. After all, it's the pernicious medium that keeps potential theatergoers at home, far from the roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd.

But the Didactic Theatre Company's smart, intense staging of "The Glory of Living," shrewdly directed by Michael Chamberlin, turns one television set into an ally. A significant element in the scenic, sound and even lighting design for much of the play, this TV comes to symbolize the squalor and spiritual emptiness of the characters' lives.

And that's a whole lot of squalor and emptiness. Rebecca Gilman's lurid drama centers on an aimless Southern teenager named Lisa (Cassie Platt). The child of a prostitute, Lisa mopes around their trailer while her mother (Maura Stadem) entertains customers behind a sheet. One day, the girl strikes up a conversation — about TV, among other topics — with a greasy car thief named Clint (Clay Steakley). Next thing you know, Lisa and Clint are married, drifting through a seedy world of highways and motels in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, amusing themselves by luring young runaway girls to have sex with Clint. That the

girls seem to wind up murdered bothers the couple not at all.

In the Didactic staging, the television set imbues the action with a chilling matter-of-factness; it's often on as Lisa and Clint manipulate their victims. In another particularly unsettling scene, the spouses stumble drunkly into their empty motel room and stagger about before collapsing on the bed, where Clint sums up his nihilistic philosophy ("Sometimes I look up at night, up at the ceiling and I think how all there is of me is right there. Right there floating between the bed and the roof.") The entire sequence is lighted only by flickering static on the small screen.

It's one of numerous artful touches that help the production conjure up a fever dream of sordidness and amorality — sort of "In Cold Blood" at the Super 8, with a dollop of salaciousness thrown in (the show contains about two seconds of nudity). The presiding genius of this low-rent dystopia is Steakley's thuggish Clint, who slinks about with hunched posture and a hand-dog look, now and then flashing a beady-eyed smile or exploding into violence.

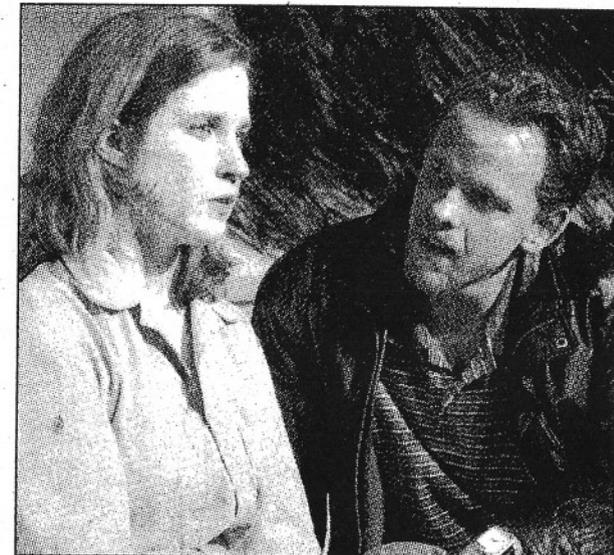
Platt is less persuasive, but then she has the tricky task, as an adult actress, of depicting a girl who's a mere 15 at the start of the play. Still, Platt has cultivated an impressive range of childlike mannerisms (lying

on her stomach and kicking her feet against the floor, for example) and vacuous stares that suggest the ethical void at the core of Lisa's being.

It's a large cast of 10, and strong performances crop up in several minor roles. Stadem is impressively sultry as Lisa's mother, dressed in leopard-skin underwear and a fuchsia silk robe (the convincing costumes, heavy on jeans, are by Kathleen Geldard). Paloma Ellis is heart-rendingly fragile as a shellshocked waif with pink-striped socks, and Heather Whitpan guzzles pretzels with zesty naivete as another unfortunate youngster.

Those hapless individuals inhabit the mangy underbelly of the American Dream, as Colin K. Bills's atmospheric sets and lighting make clear. Water-damage marks mar the walls of Lisa and Clint's room, which is littered with beer cans and fast-food containers. And the brownish light that filters through the thin curtains suggests the tired lamps of a motel parking lot.

This white-trash environment arguably is a cliché, and the play lacks the sense of spiraling crisis that makes Gilman's "Spinning Into Butter" and "Boy Gets Girl" so enjoyably unnerving. Still, "The Glory of Living" is a bold study of the banality of evil, and the Didactic production does justice both to the play's seriousness and to its sensationalism.



BY ERIK TRESTER — DIDACTIC THEATRE COMPANY

Two for the road: Cassie Platt and Clay Steakley play a couple who embark on a sordid odyssey in the Didactic Theatre Company's "The Glory of Living."

Certainly it's a respectable alternative to staying at home to channel-surf.

The Glory of Living, by Rebecca Gilman. Directed by Michael Chamberlin; sound, Erik Trestler. With Claire Bromwell, John Tweel, Joshua Drew and Christopher Poverman. About 2 hours 15 minutes. Through June 11 at Warehouse Theatre Mainstage, 1021 Seventh St. NW. Call 202-249-0782 or visit www.didactictheatre.com.