

Pikefly Theatre

BEIRUT by Alan Bowne

Dates 26 September – 7 October 2007 @ 20.00 **Venue** Studio 16, West 7th Avenue

Reviewer John Jane

Beirut's two central characters, Torch and Blue are "Lovers in a dangerous time." Bruce Cockburn's song could have been the perfect soundtrack for Alan Bowne's apocalyptic vision of a bleak, totalitarian world where paranoia is the rule, if the tune weren't so darn cheerful.

In Bowne's world, *Beirut* is not in Lebanon, but is what locals refer to as New York City's Lower East Side where those infected with a diabolical, sexually transmitted disease go to die. Torch (Adam Lolacher) has been diagnosed with the STD (AIDS is never mentioned) and is condemned to a solitary existence in a squalid, single room apartment in a dilapidated building. His surrender to despair has made him angry. His rage is not just aimed at his illness that may have handed him a death sentence but at the community that has isolated him.

If Torch is existing in despair, Blue (Mylene Dinh-Robic) lives with hope. Blue is his "healthy" girlfriend from Queens who risks her own safety to capture precious moments together. In Bowne's upside-down realm only those branded as "positive" are allowed to practice sex and only with each other. For the healthy, sex is forbidden.

Dinh-Robic and Lolacher are incredible as the ill-fated lovers. Their physical attraction is undeniable while the animal sexual tension consumes the entire theatre. Lolacher's attempt at a Brooklyn argot and Dinh-Robic's fix on a more urbane Queens accent make their performances even more believable.

Under Michael Tayles liberated direction, their actions are at times disturbing, and yet at other times, tender. Tayles keeps the production going in what feels like "real time," never allowing the pace to lag.

Beirut also manages to excel in technical aspects. Set designer Michael Gall and construction supervisor Dwayne Campbell transform Studio 16, only a week ago a Fringe Festival venue, into a life-like hovel.

The play succeeds on many levels. It's certainly good to watch despite its raunchy dialogue and occasional crude behaviour. But, more importantly, it prods the audience to search for answers long after leaving the theatre.

The playwright, Alan Bowne himself succumbed to AIDS in 1989, at the wastefully young age of 44.

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