

# No shortage of rage in bleak Beirut

Jo Ledingham, Vancouver Courier

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BEIRUT

At Studio 16 until Oct. 7

American playwright Alan Bowne said he wrote to expose his demons. Some demons. Some exposure.

Beirut is the name he gives to a New York neighbourhood under quarantine in some near-future scenario. An AIDS-like plague haunts the land and those who have succumbed to the virus have "P" for positive tattooed on their butts. In the thousands, the so-called "positives" are relocated to Beirut, hidden away singly in squalid rooms (excellently evoked by set designer Michael Gall) and subjected to daily inspection by the Lesion Squad. "Drop your shorts," growls the club-swinging patroller. Bend over. And worse, much worse.

The language isn't pretty. The subject isn't pretty. And Bowne doesn't pull his punches. There's fury in every line. "Positives can't f--- negatives," howls "positive" Torch (Adam Lolacher) to "negative" girlfriend Blue (Mylène Dinh-Robic) who sneaks into his filthy Beirut hole to have sex with him--for the first time, apparently.

And herein lies the problem: why does she do it? If invasion of privacy is here redefined, so is love. We are expected to go on trust that Torch and Blue love each other, that she is willing--even eager--to die a horrible, full-blown AIDS death with him. Assuming there are at least a handful of negative males out there, why Torch? "I can't shake you, Blue. I can't sleep without thinking of hurting you," he tells her. Call me a WASP, but those don't sound like sweet nothings to me.

If Bowne exorcizes his demons in this play, he exercises them, too. With Lolacher in dingy boxers and Dinh-Robic in black bra, bikini underwear and sneakers, Beirut looks more like a wrestling match than a love story. They grapple, he nearly strangles her, throws her down on the dirty sheet-tangled mattress. They may be star-crossed lovers (positive/negative) but Romeo and Juliet (Montague/Capulet) they ain't.

Beirut marks Michael Tayles' directing debut and his passion and energy are obvious. What we need to see, however, are more than a couple moments of something other than rage between Torch and Blue. The script may not have provided any evidence but perhaps Tayles could have found something--anything--to convince us. Life outside Beirut is obviously hell, too; maybe Blue just has nothing to lose. Maybe she just has a death wish and Torch is the weapon of choice. It's only at the very end that it's possible to believe anything but wrath unites these two.

On a practical note, sight lines in a venue without a steep rake make mattress scenes on the floor difficult or impossible to see. It's frustrating to have to imagine the action -- especially when you just know where the action is going to end up.

If Beirut is energetic and anger-fuelled, so are the performances. Lolacher and Dinh-Robic don't hold back (and one wonders if the bruises on Dinh-Robic's legs got there during rehearsal. She could be black and blue by the end of the run.) Because the characters are New Yorkers (he, from the Bronx; she, from Queens), both actors lay on the accents. Unfortunately, instead of feeling authentic it feels stagey and, in the case of Dinh-Robic, a lot of her dialogue is impossible to catch. Neither, however, can be faulted for lack of commitment. They both work their almost bare butts off to make this nasty script work.

Russ Ball appears briefly and terrifyingly as the guard from the Lesion Squad. It's not much more than a cameo, but Ball makes every second count. The air in the theatre is thick with fear and for a moment we imagine the unthinkable will happen.

Not nice. Not pretty. But Bowne, who died of AIDS in 1989 at the age of 44, was entitled to his rage.