

Film Noir Inspired

Echo Theater Company and Theatre Ghosts present 'Dead Man'

By Laura Latzko
The Argonaut Staff Writer

Ann Noble's clown noir comedy "Dead Man" had a successful run at the Hollywood Fringe Festival this June. Now, she is bringing the show back with the same cast and the same story for a three-day run.

Echo Theater Company and Theatre Ghosts will present "Dead Man" three Tuesdays, July 21, July 28 and Aug. 4, at the Atwater Village Theatre.

Noble wrote, directed and stars in the production.

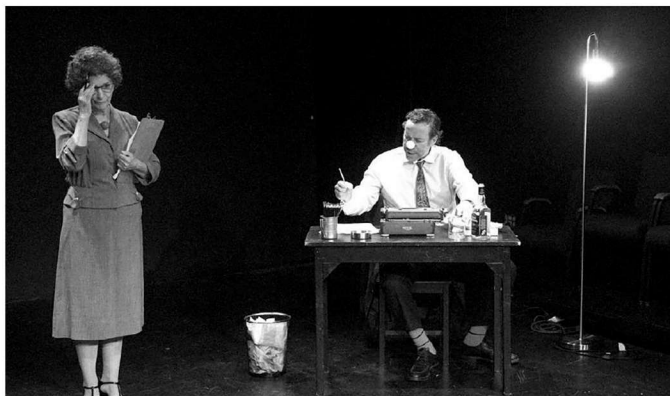
The show follows a private investigator, who is trying to solve a murder. He is investigating "a crime everyone wants to forget."

"There's a private eye, a Humphrey Bogart-type character. There is a dead man. Somebody killed the dead man, and he has to figure out who killed the dead man. But he's also a writer, so he's like a Raymond Chandler... He's been trying to write a short story or a novel about his life. He's searching his memories of the stories he's written, like crumpled-up pages in his garbage can. He's trying to use his memories to solve the mystery of the dead man. He's got an intrepid secretary, a snarky secretary that gives him grief. Then, there's a femme fatale. That's who I play. There's an actor who plays the dead man. He plays a couple of different characters. He's always changing his identity. It goes in and out of the present and the past as we weave through the story," Noble said.

The biggest difference with this version of the show is the staging. The Atwater Village Theatre stage is different than the Broadwater stage, where they presented during the fringe festival.

"The theater is a different shape. We're moving from a thrust space into a regular proscenium space. We're just doing a little re-blocking... Over the course of the run at [Hollywood] Fringe, we kept selling out, and we kept having to add chairs. So, our stage got smaller and smaller as the run went on. So, that will be the challenge in the new space. It's a little bit bigger. We'll have to lift our voices more. The audience is further away. When we talk to the audience, that's more of a reach," Noble said.

All of the characters in the show are clowns, but they aren't dressed up in full makeup and costuming.



Ann Noble's clown noir "Dead Man" stars Robin McDonald and Jeffrey Johnson.



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Ann Noble's clown noir comedy "Dead Man" stars Christian Haines, Robin McDonald and Ann Noble.

"The only thing that would tell you it's a clown show is we're all wearing noses. Everything else is completely in the noir film noir style. We're all in black and white, the very sleek 1930s/1940s style. It would be like watching 'The Maltese Falcon,' but we all have clown noses on," Noble said.

Noble has now done four clown shows. She started writing them around the height of COVID.

"They all have an element of not being sure what's really real. Is this the real world, or is it not the real world? Who are we exactly? Are we this clown, or are we a person pretending to be a clown? I'm always playing with that reality... When you put on a clown nose, then people know it's going to be funny. They open their minds. It's like watching an animated film. When you watch animation, you're much more open because you know it's not real, but somehow it allows more truth to come in," Noble said.

Noble is not trained in clowning but has done mask work and Commedia dell'arte.

"When you put on a clown nose, it's a bit like wearing a mask. It gives you freedom as an actor to be less you and more you at the same time. It allows for an element of the absurd to come in," Noble said.

Along with Noble as the femme fatale character, the production stars Jeffrey Johnson as the private detective, Robin McDonald as the secretary and Christian Haines as the dead man and other characters.

Noble wanted to keep the same cast because the parts were written specifically for the actors.

"I write for their kind of comedy, their sense of humor, their sense of drama, their energy, their tone of voice. They're all people I know well, so I know them as human beings as well as actors. I don't know if I can describe it exactly, but definitely I write for their beingness and their artistic sensibilities," Noble said.

Noble wanted to feature actors that fit well together but all bring their own individual strengths.

"I would say that they're all different instruments, but they're definitely all string instruments. So, they go well together. They can play in the same kind of style, but they are all very different within that... It's in a noir style, so it has a heightened qual-

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ity to it. I needed actors who could do that but also have the depth and have the chops to go deep and to make it really real as well. So, they have to be very dexterous actors," Noble said.

For the show, the actors wear their own attire. Noble already had shoes from the time period.

"The guys have suits, vests, trench coats and hats. The secretary wears a little gray suit... If you saw us in a lineup, we'd look right out of the movies," Noble said.

There were some 1930s-'40s props that they had to search for, such as an ashtray and typewriter that looked like they came from that era.

"Because it is clown, some of the items can be a little more exaggerated or be not exactly right on, and it still works," Noble said.

Everything in the show had to fit with the noir color scheme, which is black and white with a hint of red.

Noble has long been a fan of the film noir style. Some of her favorite noir films are "Sweet Smell of Success," "Detour," "The Maltese Falcon" and "Gilda."

"I watched a whole bunch last summer when I was percolating on the idea. Whenever I get an idea for a show or for a play, I try to research the style or the world I'm thinking of immersing it in," Noble said.

Noble wanted to bring a show that looked and sounded similar to the dark, gritty crime dramas.

"All the tropes are there, all the fun references, the idiomatic expressions,

the banter, the guns, the lighting, the style, the music," Noble said.

Noble said that the film noir style translates well for theater.

"Lead characters would narrate what they were doing. That's actually very theatrical. In film noir, movies were done more like plays. They had longer scenes, longer shots. They didn't switch camera angles around a lot because they couldn't. So, it's not that far of a leap actually," Noble said.

Noble has found that there is a definite appreciation for the film noir style in LA.

"It's such an iconic era, especially for Hollywood...Los Angeles and New York are the hubs of the noir world. I think it's nostalgia for a golden age, and everybody loves a mystery. People really responded to it. Our audiences really, really loved it, and a lot of people are coming back to see it again... There is a mystery and a twist in it. A lot of people want to come back and see if they can see the mystery from the beginning," Noble said. ■

Echo Theater Company and Theatre Ghosts' production of "Dead Man"

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesdays, July 28 and August 4

WHERE: Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Avenue, Los Angeles. Parking free at the Atwater Crossing (AXT) lot one block south of the theater

COST: \$20

INFO: echotheatercompany.ludus.com