

by TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Dead Man

Echo Theater Company at Atwater Village Theatre

Fresh off its initial run at the Hollywood Fringe Festival in June, Ann Noble's *Dead Man* has risen from the you-know-what for a fleeting three-Tuesday night resurrection in Atwater Village. Written and directed by Noble, her fast-paced hour of "theatre noir clown style" burlesque takes off with a loving, irreverent wink at Raymond Chandler, starting right from the get-go with that dirt-old chestnut, "It was a dark and stormy night."

From there, the show cascades through a nonstop string of Chanderlesque "it was like a..." analogies, gleefully poking the hard-boiled detective genre with delightfully mischievous spirit. The premise blends iconic noir archetypes with vivid and exaggerated comic energy: a familiar wisecracking world-weary private dick attempting to write his own dime novel (Jeffrey Johnson), his traditionally smartass snappy-patter spouting Glenda Farrell clone of a secretary (Robin McDonald), and a slinky, mysterious blonde named Biscuit (played with dryly wicked gusto by Noble herself).

Then there is Christian Haines as the titular dead guy who stubbornly refuses to stay put. When he isn't sprawled onstage as the play's omnipresent and highly restless corpse, Haines is frantically sprinting to the coat track to don one trenchcoat after another, popping up as a rapid-fire series of peripheral tongue-in-cheek stereotypical characters.

Dead Man is wonderfully devoid of any redeeming social value aside from the pure unadulterated joy of having fun. The four-person veteran ensemble operates like a well-oiled engine, juggling sharp physical schtick and genre-spoofing banter, all the while stealthily stepping over the obligatory centerstage chalk outline. It doesn't lecture, it doesn't pontificate, and it certainly doesn't burden the audience with a moral lesson. Instead, the multitalented Noble relies on her sharp theatrical instincts and the sheer pleasure of guiding her game costars as they play well together in the dark.

With the opening night performance already just past, there are only two final Tuesday night performances left to catch this slyly stylish piece of stagecraft before it vanishes again.

REMAINING SHOWS JULY 28 and AUG. 4: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 747.350.8066 or EchoTheaterCompany.com