

IN THIS PLAY, A FILMMAKER TRIES TO MAKE A MOVIE SHOWING A WOMAN COMMITTING SUICIDE (GO!)

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Mariel Higuera and Daniel Dorr in *Viral*

Photo by Justin Zsebe

Funerals emerge as a metaphoric backdrop in the West Coast premiere of Mac Rogers' *Viral*, as well as in *Billy Elliot – The Musical*, the London and Broadway sensation now enjoying a regional-theater presentation at La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts. The latter concerns a coal mining town in the U.K. being buried by Margaret Thatcher's union busting. The former is a comedy about assisted suicide. (Yes, you read that correctly.) Both are worth seeing.

Rogers' new comic drama, presented by Moving Arts at the Bootleg Theatre, is entirely about a death wish – specifically, a trio of Portland slacker-scammers trying to cash in on Oregon's liberal assisted-suicide laws. Control-freak filmmaker Colin (Daniel Dorr) uses a website to lure in a Bay

Area subject, Meredith (Alicia Adams), for his latest opus: a video documenting a suicide by sleeping pills. Colin claims to be an artist. He doesn't wish to traffic in violence or to show a drop of blood in his movies – just the ethereal transformation as a body passes from fragile life to its expiration. Colin is a Fellini of the snuff-film industry. He's also a bully to his partners, siblings Jarvis (Oscar Camacho) and Geena (Mariel Higuera).

There are two answers to the premise's most glaring question: Why would they make this film? One hope is that one of the online snuff films will go "viral" and lead them all to a better neighborhood. But this can only be accomplished with the help of a distributor named Snow (Mark Kinsey Stephenson), who parades around the tawdry apartment with an evangelist's theatricality. The other reason is the trio's sexual predilection for watching people die.

If you can accept this much (I was cautiously willing to do so), the next challenge is trying to believe that a character such as Meredith, in Adams' magnetic performance of wry intelligence and droll expression, would be willing to put the end of her life in the hands of such crass incompetents and obvious frauds.

In Darin Anthony's staging, Colin opens many of the short scenes as a bundle of frayed nerves. His chronic anxiety is clearly a cause of his bullying, and that bullying gives Meredith a fleeting reason to defend Colin's fluttery, docile girlfriend, Geena – providing Meredith a reason to live. This is one of the play's many welcome threads of irony.

Like the suicidal Jessie Cates in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, Meredith has no terminal disease. She's simply a middle-aged woman alone, bereft of hope or ambition, weary of her financially impoverished, dead-end life.

Meredith has a refrain: "I don't care." She also mentions at least twice that she has no money. Is that reason enough to play dead, to be dead, with these clowns? Or would that question fade were they less neurotic?

Anthony's production toys with the style of a David Mamet-like comedy, such as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* – a portrait of inept desperados trying to live the American Dream. That the Dream is here dependent on a vicarious psycho-sexual-social obsession with death is both cynical and pointed. That any emotional investment in this play results in feelings of disgust is its primary virtue. It's an unblinking look at pathologies. I only wish it were slightly more believable.