DeLillo off the Page
The acclaimed novelist’s new play might make a better book.

By Tony Adler

As a playwright, Don DeLillo makes an excellent novelist. This isn’t as damning as it sounds. There’s something merciless, meticulous writing in DeLillo’s new Love-Lies-Bleeding. The language is interesting for the way it traps anguish in frozen, formal diction. The characters each have their own weight and mass. The premise provides an elegantly simple mechanism for exploring primal issues. It’s all very strong. It just doesn’t belong on a stage.

Or more accurately: it has no urgent reason for being on a stage. The celebrated author of such novels as White Noise, Libra, and Underwood hasn’t managed to turn his strength into a play, by which I mean a narrative that demands to be performed—that can’t be fully realized, understood, felt except through performance.

Love-Lies-Bleeding is essentially a fiction in dialogue form. You can close your eyes, listen, and never feel as if you’ve missed anything important.

Indeed, you may find your eyes closing against your will. With nothing crucial to feed on despite highly competent acting and beautiful stage pictures, the optic orb all too easily opts out.

Love-Lies-Bleeding centers on Alex, who himself has opted out of more ways than one. A land artist—not unlike Michael Heizer, who’s spent the last 35 years building a single monumental earthenwork in the Nevada desert—Alex retreated into arid desert—Alex retreated into arid desert—Alex retreated into arid desert—Alex retreated into arid desert. He spends his days twitching, staring, meowing, his remaining time in the rusted shell of a home hecarved into the side of a mountain. Sean argues that this is the “single” poetic line playing the vegetable while another (John Heard) portrays the artist before and between strokes. Nothing comes of this conceit, though. The vegetable simply sits there while the invalid as if he were already dead. Sean and Toinettes come on like callous sophisticates. But before long it becomes clear that DeLillo isn’t interested in setting up heroes and villains or entering the contemporary debate over the good death. Sean and Toinettes are allowed to only other glow onstage comes from Martha Lavey’s Toinette. She makes Toinette a person, though they are, figures like these are literary rather than the life concepts of the beloved. "The measured pace of Amy Morton’s distanced, deliberate Steppenwolf production tends to exacerbate DeLillo’s shortcomings, making his story that much less interesting for being slower and defeating his rare attempts at humor. The show’s far more grim than it has to be. Scene designer Lor Arcenas injects a little interest by filling the back of the playing area with a glowing southwestern landscape, but the other only light onstage comes from Martha Lavey’s Toinette. Alternately wised-up, rueful, and coquettish (when she’s flirting with the protrude Alex), Lavey constitutes the production’s sole locus of individualized humanity. She makes Toinettes a person. Heard tries to generate a similar warmth for Alex, but in four words, his impulse is wrong. Ornery and charismatic enough to have gone through four wives, visionary and arrogant enough to appropriate mountains for his art, Alex needs to be an outsize personality—part Picasso and part Howard Roark. That Heard renders him nothing more than a kind of shining nice guy subverts his touted mystique, deprives the production of a magnetic central character, and begs the question of why we should be upset about his awful fate.

Ultimately Love-Lies-Bleeding reminds me of nothing so much as what old-time movie cops say when they’re breaking up a crowd at the scene of an accident. Nothing to see here. Move along.

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Don DeLillo’s “daring…provocative…exquisite” (The Washington Post) new novel weighs the darkness of the world—terrorism, floods, fires, famine, plague—against the beauty and humanity of everyday life; love, awe, “the intimate touch of earth and sun.” One of the most mysterious, emotionally moving, and rewarding books of DeLillo’s long career (The New York Times Book Review), Zero K is a glorious, soulful novel from one of the great writers of our time. About The Author. Don DeLillo is the author of fifteen novels, including Zero K, Underworld, Falling Man, White Noise, and Libra. He has won the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Jerusalem Prize for his complete body of work, and the William Dean Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. DeLillo goes on like that, off the cuff but on the money, for most of an hour. You can see why a publisher would want to send such an articulate artist on a promotional tour, especially when the publisher has paid somewhere around $1 million for a manuscript by a critically acclaimed author who has written 11 novels and never had a best seller. And while DeLillo is famously not fond of the spotlight, he’s trying hard to do his part. There’s pleasure on every page of this pitch-perfect evocation of a sour, anxious half century. The pleasure comes from incident and insight, but more than anything else it comes from language. DeLillo has heard America singing, talking, weeping, kvetching, and he hasn’t missed a syllable. deLillos is a Norwegian poprock band formed in Oslo in 1984. They are generally regarded as one the “Four Greats” in modern Norwegian pop music, i.e. one of the four 1980s groups that founded a new tradition for rock music with lyrics in Norwegian. The remaining three “Greats” are DumDum Boys, Raga Rockers and Jokke & Valentinerne. Lars Lillo-Stenberg – guitar, vocals, organ, piano, synthesizer and writer (1984-present). Lars Fredrik Beckstrøm – bass and vocals (1984-present).