

Theater

LOVE-LIES-BLEEDING STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY

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 some 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 *Underworld* hasn't managed to turn his strong elements 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 in more ways than one. A land artist—not unlike Michael Heizer, who's spent the last 35 years building a single monumental earthwork in the Nevada desert—Alex retreated into arid isolation some time back. Now two strokes have left him helpless and very possibly brain-dead. He spends his days strapped into a wheelchair, twitching, staring, mewling, tended by his much younger fourth wife, Lia, and main-

tained by intravenous drip. Then Sean and Toinette, Alex's grown son and second wife, arrive with a bottle of morphine and a plan. They want to euthanize the old lion, only they've got to convince Lia.

There's a culture clash as these urban east-coast interlop-

ers try to push their quality-of-life concepts on the devoted custodian for whom a vegetative Alex is better than none at all. Sardonicly discussing the invalid as if he were already dead, Sean and Toinette 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 Toinette are allowed their own sense of devotion; they come to an understanding with Lia; and *Love-Lies-Bleeding* resolves into what it really wants to be—a meditation on what Welsh poet Alun Lewis perceived as the "single" poetic theme: "Life and Death . . . what survives of the beloved."

And it's an often lovely meditation at that. The script is chock-full of resonant metaphors and poignant exchanges. Alex's great unfinished work, we're told, is an empty room he was carving—like a burial chamber? a hidden heart?—into the core of a mountain. Sean argues that Alex in his broken state is "no longer and not yet." Evocative though they are, figures like

these are literary rather than theatrical. DeLillo's lone attempt at visual storytelling is to divide the role of Alex between two actors, one (Larry Kucharik, with fakirlike discipline) playing the vegetable while another (John Heard) portrays the artist before and between strokes. Nothing comes of that conceit, though. The vegetable simply sits there vegetating while his comparatively healthy doppelganger talks to people. No exchange is reached or frustrated; no equation is asserted, beyond the obvious: here's Alex before, and this is him after.



Love-Lies-Bleeding

Coincidentally, you can find out how a real playwright handles the same formal challenge by seeing Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, currently at the Apple Tree Theatre. Albee takes a comatose old lady and divides

her up into her young, middle-aged, and dying selves, giving them rein not only to argue with one another but to scare the old lady's son as he observes his deathbed vigil. The result is funny, profound, and visually dynamic. Theatrical.

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 glum than it has to be. Scenic designer Loy Arcenas injects a little interest by filling the back of the playing area with a glowing southwestern landscape, but the only other glow onstage comes from Martha Lavey's Toinette. Alternately wised-up, rueful, and coquettish (when she's flirting with the prestroke Alex), Lavey constitutes the production's sole

locus of individuated humanity. She makes Toinette a person.

Heard tries to generate a similar warmth for Alex, but in his case the impulse is wrong. Ornerly 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 as nothing more than a kind of shambling 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's "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 Beckström "bass and vocals (1984-present).