

Newsday

Theater & Arts

THEATER REVIEW

Love, war and family collide in an absurdist mix

By Linda Winer, STAFF WRITER

DECEMBER 14, 2005

She has the bemused, tufted smile of a cat. He has the ornery bluff of a buzzard. **Rosemary Harris and John Cullum are riveting** together as Levana and Atom, a long-married couple who bury the dead for money during decades of war between his town and her former village.

In Ariel Dorfman's "The Other Side," the 75-minute wartime parable that opened last night at Manhattan Theatre Club, **the connection between these theater royals is electric. An unexpected rough gesture from the elegant Harris or a lemon-tinged outburst from the low-key Cullum pulls us into the material with urgency.**

Dorfman, former cultural adviser to Salvador Allende's brutalized Chilean socialist government, is best known here in his adopted country for "Death and the Maiden," which had a brief and underappreciated run on Broadway in 1992. Like that drama, "The Other Side" revolves around a couple's ambiguous reaction to a stranger. In the earlier play, he may have been the torturer of political prisoners. In this one, he bursts through the wall as a peacekeeping soldier who may be the couple's long-estranged son.

We are in an old wooden shack (designed by Beowulf Boritt), surrounded by bombed-out rubble, in what feels like an Eastern European country. The only finery is a red bedspread over a mattress that covers piles of old suitcases. The only visual sign of intimacy is a photo of a young boy above the bed.

Harris has holes in her black cotton stockings (costumes by Linda Cho) but obviously dresses carefully to preserve the disguise of civilization. Cullum sits at an old table, filling out forms as if the activity — making files of the corpses for posterity — connected their isolation to the big-city life he once enjoyed. For all the sadness and the horror, they still adore each other. They take a break from dragging in the dead for a raunchy tumble on the bed.

As staged by Blanka Zizka, co-artistic director of the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia, things perk up when the soldier bashes into the house, climbs onto the precious bedspread in his boots and bisects the bed with yellow tape. He is from the border patrol, sent to enforce the brave new armistice by "repatriating people" to their original sides. There will be no more "cross-cultural mating." Electricity will finally be provided — in order to electrify a separating wall.

This is a **fascinating** character, this walking-wounded offspring of wars so ancient that people know whom they hate but can't remember why. **Gene Farber has a sweet, rambunctious quality** that expresses the desperation of growing up in chaos and slaughter. He has a touching attachment to ridiculous rules, including immediately required visas and "everything in its place."

Levana is sure he is their son. Atom isn't certain. Dorfman, who has two other new plays being produced at U.S. theaters this season, makes a connection between tribal wars and bickering families. But when the young man touches the older woman, he grabs her all over with a primal confusion that could suggest he is a son or a plundering soldier. **When Harris and Cullum finally clutch at the essence of what might have been their own, Dorfman pulls us deep into the agony and absurdity on all sides of ongoing war.**

THE OTHER SIDE.

BY ARIEL DORFMAN, DIRECTED BY BLANKA ZIZKA. MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB, 131 W. 55TH ST., THROUGH JAN. 15. TICKETS \$65. CALL 212-581-1212. SEEN AT SATURDAY AFTERNOON PREVIEW.



Rosemary Harris

Gene Farber

John Cullum

Hartford Courant.

3 Lost Souls Caught In A Crumbling World

Dorfman's Absurdist 'Other Side' Speaks Of War, Love, Family

By MALCOLM JOHNSON,
SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

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The muffled explosions constantly pound away, punctuated by hoarse whispers of rockets and flashes that light up the grim terrain around the jerrybuilt shack. The playwright, Ariel Dorfman, ("Death and the Maiden") is Chilean American, but he has set **his gripping, dark, absurdist "The Other Side"** in a fictional war zone that might be Bosnia.

This is a play about waiting - not for Godot but for peace, and for the return of the lost son whose boyhood photograph decorates the back wall of Beowulf Boritt's setting of roughly carpentered wood. Atom Roma and Levana Julak, **the old couple finely drawn by two great stage veterans, John Cullum and Rosemary Harris**, recall the man and wife in ash cans in Beckett's "Endgame." As in that post-apocalyptic vision, the world outside seems dead. And so it is. Brick rubble surrounds the shack, and ultimately the lighting by Russell H. Champa reveals row upon row of gravestones. Atom and Levana live by burying the corpses that perpetually fall in the border territory. They keep detailed records of their work.

"The Other Side," which had its American premiere Tuesday night at New York City Center - Stage I under the aegis of the Manhattan Theatre Club, begins with bickering. A bomb has detonated somewhere close. Levana thinks it landed "here in Tomis." Atom responds: "The other side of the river. In Constanza."

Gradually, Dorfman lets us know about Atom, who comes from a city, and Levana, who grew up in a peasant's hut. Their life together began as a great love story, as he was from Tomis and she from Constanza - and hatred flamed on both sides, even before the war that has run on and on for 20 years now. Their ardor burns still, and they lock the doors before making love, in a reenactment of "our first night" and its promise that "we will grow old together." But a new crash interrupts their idyll, and it is time to go to work. Atom takes out his tarpaulin and drags in a new victim. Inspecting his face, Levana coos sweetly: "He's a pretty boy, don't you think?"

Blanka Zizka, the director, and Dorfman begin by setting out the repeti-

tive quotidian existence of a couple caught in the middle of an unending struggle. Cullum and Harris project a sense that every day goes something like this, as Atom and Levana scratch out a living as caretakers of a bone yard in no man's land.

But the intermissionless play has barely begun when a change comes. Levana's radio comes alive with the news: "Peace is here, an agreement has been signed. The war is over." And the husband and wife dance.

Dorfman shatters the moment with a **shocking crash that turns the domestic farce into a slide into monstrous, satirical surrealism.** Scott Killian's sound fills the theater with a clap of spitting wood, and the back wall splinters and collapses. A hellhound in fatigues from some netherworld inferno storms in, his bearded visage sooty and masked by goggles. The monster drives an iron stake at the head of the couple's bed, then walks across Levana's treasured bedspread, with a yellow tape, which he affixes to another stake. Both Atom and Levana have taken refuge under the old bed, but the Guard cries out, "Atom Roma."

With the thunderous entrance of Gene Farber's menacing Guard, "The Other Side" takes on a new color and hits closer to home. For the interloper has planted a new border between Tomis and Constanza, and matters of national security come into play. Atom must remain on the Tomis side of the yellow plastic ribbon, while Levana, who has been living as an "illegal alien," must be confined to Constanza. Suddenly, a hazardous but relatively free life on the border gives way to a fascist state, with the Guard as the arbiter of every move, even determining when Atom can use his pre-

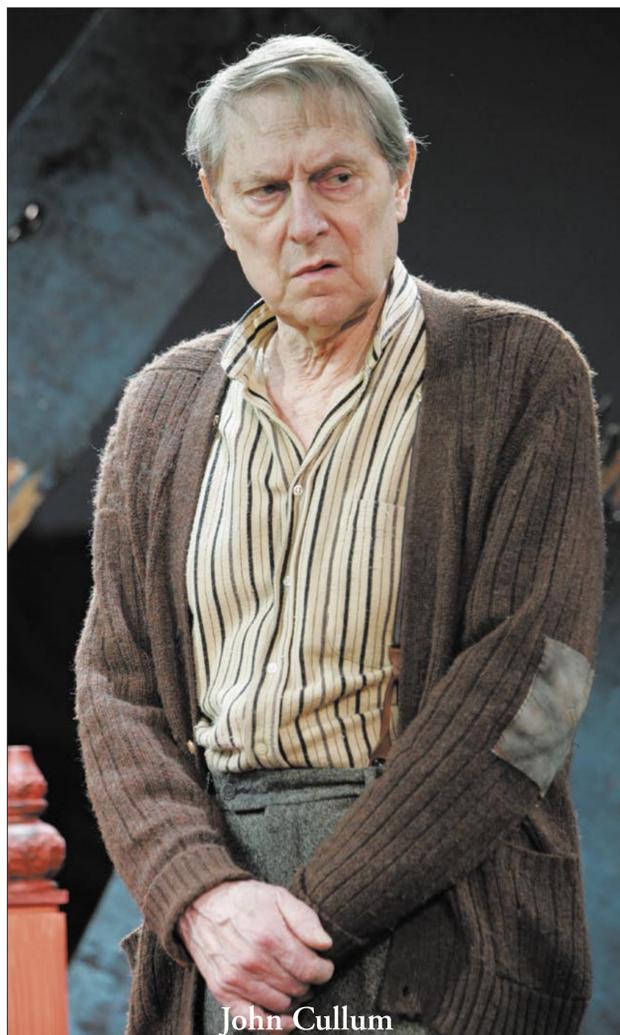
cious toilet, now on the Constanza side. Similarly, Levana needs a visa to fix soup, as her pitiful little stove sits in the Tomis sector.

The title of "The Other Side" takes on a scarier meaning, with implications of the Berlin wall or a border between Mexico and the United States patrolled by vigilantes. With the hammer, the Guard becomes a horrific figure. **Yet Dorfman has new ideas, and Zizka tempers the menacing climate with the ludicrous folly of government regulations,** which come in a huge tome.

In one transition, the Guard becomes sympathetic. Having shown a young man's face by removing the goggles, he slips back to childhood in an echo of Atom's reverie on grass. The transformation is occasioned by the opening of a gray, cardboard box, as the couple's belongings are to be divided or confiscated. The first treasure to emerge is a child's wooden tractor. Then books. Then a ball.

Farber rises to the moment with a portrait of a lost, divided soul holding his own against his Tony-winning elders. And at last, Harris deepens the emotional pull of "The Other Side" as Levana decides that this boy must be her long-awaited Joseph. Yet the world grows terrible again, as more bombs explode, and Atom and Levana find they must continue their gravediggers' duties. And the lovely old woman wonders what they should "call this boy, this beautiful, beautiful boy."

THE OTHER SIDE is at New York City Center — Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., New York. N.Y.



John Cullum



Rosemary Harris