

Review | 'Love Song' at the Living Room

By ROBERT TRUSSELL

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Charm and acerbic humor rarely coexist as comfortably as they do in John Kolvenbach's "Love Song," an eccentric, clever and oddly sentimental two-act play that offers a unique take on mental illness.

The well-acted production at the Living Room, directed by Katie Gilchrist, may not provide all the clarity this piece needs, but some viewers will certainly leave the theater thinking about the nature of love and our innate ability to delude ourselves when it comes to matters of the heart.

In the play's opening moment, we see Beane (Bryan Moses), a gaunt man in an oversized raincoat, alone in a room initially cloaked in darkness. Then the room is suddenly illuminated by the yellow glow of an old floor lamp. We don't know who or where he is, or how long he's been standing in the dark, but within a few seconds the focus shifts to the apartment of his sister Joan (Shawna Journagan) and her husband Harry (Rusty Sneary).

Joan is a slash-and-burn businesswoman who fires interns on a regular basis and calms down after an intense day at the office by drinking heavily. Harry is her amused, somewhat detached soulmate who seems to appreciate the absurdities of life.

They tolerate Beane's eccentricities (the script never says so, but his behavior seems consistent with bipolar disorder) and try to take care of him. When Harry tries to administer a diagnostic, multiple-choice test, Beane's answers are minimal, oblique, logical in their own peculiar way — and maddening to Harry.

Beane's depression lifts after he comes home and finds a burglar in his apartment. Molly (Kimberely Queen) complains harshly because Beane owns almost nothing of value to steal and she threatens him with an imaginary gun while giving him a lengthy tongue-lashing. Beane is immediately smitten.

As is usually the case with a man in love, his mood improves considerably — even if he now expresses himself with manic enthusiasm for even the most mundane things in life.

The question, of course, is whether Molly is real or a figment of Beane's

imagination. And if she's an illusion constructed from Beane's brain chemistry, what does it matter if he seems happy?

Kolvenbach's play is elliptical by design and he never provides a concrete answer to the question of whether Molly is actual or imagined. He attempts a sort of poetry that alludes, suggests and proposes, but allows the viewers to draw their own conclusions about what transpires on stage.

Moses is a highly effective as Beane — by turns convincingly manic and intensely taciturn — while Sneary and Journagan play off each other with an acute sense of comic timing and infectious good humor.

But Queen is a most pleasant surprise. Well known for her high-camp turns in Ron Megee productions, Queen is rarely asked to do "serious" acting. But that's what she does in this show and the results are impressive. Queen finds a way to be menacing, aggressive, vulnerable, charming and funny all in one package.

Living Room regular Cody Wyoming makes a cameo appearance as a waiter who views Beane's enthusiasm about a turkey sandwich skeptically. Wyoming delivers a nice, deadpan performance.

The design elements are minimal but effective.

"Love Song" runs through March 21 at the Living Room, 1818 McGee. Call 816-221-4260 or go to www.livingroomkc.com.

To reach Robert Trussell, theater critic, call 816-234-4765 or send email to rtrussell@kcstar.com.

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