

Theater review: 'Roan' at Luna feels like old news



Natalie (Aaliyah Habeeb) hugs Roan (Mel House) in the Russian Airport.

COURTESY JODY CRISTOPHERSON

Roan @ The Gates

By Christina Gorman

Through Feb. 24

Luna Stage, 555 Valley Road

LunaStage.org/Roan

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By GWEN OREL

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The thing about news... is that it should be new.

Fiction inspired by old news is challenged from the start.

Such is the case with "Roan @ The Gates," a play by Christina Gorman which made its World Premiere at Luna Stage this past weekend.

It's not that a good story can't be made out of recent, current events: people are loving "Vice," a fictional movie about Dick Cheney.

But it's a given that a piece inspired by recent history must have more to offer than the questions we've already considered.

In addition, when the news is old, the story needs to be either firmly set in the past, or completely updated.

Gorman wants it both ways. It does not work.

A 2019 audience can no longer hear the word "FSB" neutrally. When Roan hides out in Russia, it's implausible that the current situation with Russia never comes up. We feel differently about WikiLeaks and Julian Assange now (neither is mentioned in the play, but they hover over them, as they do over the story of Snowden).

Artistic Director Ari Laura Kreith clearly is choosing plays that examine moral choices, and connect to current events. But to have that impact on an audience, the play must be uncomfortable and surprising. "Roan" is predictable.

The only thing new about it is the focus on the relationship between Roan, the Snowden figure, and her wife, which was inspired by a photo of Snowden with his girlfriend, according to a release.

It's an interesting thought, but it isn't really developed. In the play Roan, like Snowden, flies to Hong Kong to leak documents about the United States surveilling its own people, and then is unable to return home. Natalie had no idea she

would do this.

In scene after scene, Roan and Natalie argue. A lot could be done with one more character, or even with monologues directed at an unseen character. We hear about Natalie being taken off an important case, because she tells Roan about it: telling us, not showing us. Gorman tries to make the situations in which the two women speak interesting – it's Skype, so get in the frame; they're typing in messenger, which can be misconstrued – but it really isn't dramatic.

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And the most obvious repercussions of Roan's actions are left until the end. Surely the first words out of the mouth of a wife to a spouse who's made a huge decision for both of them, upending their plans to start a family and everything else, would be "How could you do this to us? When are you coming home? What about the embryos?" not, "Are you eating?" and offers to help, and questions about what drove her to do what she did.

When Roan asks Natalie to come live in asylum in Russia, she looks like an idiot, not a principled truth-teller. The embryos are in America, after all. (In real life, Snowden is still with his girlfriend, Lindsay Mills, a dancer.)

Mel House plays Roan as wide-eyed and sincere, but her emoting sometimes falls flat. Aaliyah Habeeb's Natalie shows gumption, guts and fire, and she has an almost maternal energy with Roan. But though engaging, her character lacks nuance.

Michelle Tattenbaum's direction is on the nose, and the actors bring out their issues rather than their connection.

The real star of the show is the design.

The elegant set design by Christopher and Justin Swader, consisting of two picture frame sets, one within another, and sliding doors for the airport, is gorgeous.

Marika Kent's lighting design includes flashing red lights that illustrate emotion during a scene in which the two women are texting, and Megan Culley's electronic sound design adds to the ambience. "Roan @ The Gates" is as slick and gorgeous as anything you'd see in New York.

The design truly does startle, surprise and unsettle, and leaves you questioning its meaning.

Culture in brief: 'Roan @ The Gates' at Luna Stage

ROAN @ THE GATES

World Premiere by Christina Gorman

| Directed by Michelle Tattenbaum



———— Aaliyah Habeeb



Mel House —————

Aaliyah Habeeb and Mel House will star in Christina Gorman's cyber-security romance "Roan @ The Gates," directed by Michelle Tattenbaum at Luna Stage, 555 Valley Road, West Orange. This World Premiere features an all-female cast and female-led creative team. It started previews on Thursday, Jan. 31, and runs through Sunday, Feb. 24.

In a release, Luna writes: "Inspired by a shadowy photograph of Edward Snowden's girlfriend, Roan @ The Gates is a fictional investigation into cyber-security. Roan is a data analyst for the NSA, and her wife, Nat, is a lawyer committed to human rights advocacy. When their personal life collides with national security, it launches a beautiful, high-stakes adventure that illuminates the cost of secrecy."

Set in Washington D.C. and Russia, “Roan @ The Gates” explores what happens when personal lives collide with national security.

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Luna continues, “‘Roan @ The Gates’ is the third play in Luna’s 2019-2020 season, which centers around the question of how we bridge cultural divides. Each play is set in at least two locations (Roan takes place in Washington D.C. and Russia) and grapples with contemporary human connection and communication. Earlier this season Luna produced J.Stephen Brantley’s ‘Pirira,’ set simultaneously in the African nation of Malawi

and midtown Manhattan, and Camilo Almonacid’s ‘The Assignment,’ an interview-inspired piece exploring gun violence and reconciliation. Coming in April is Gabriel Jason Dean’s ‘Heartland,’ set in Nebraska and Afghanistan, which explores family, loss, and love.

Playwright Christina Gorman’s plays have been produced at The Public Theater, American Blues Theater, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Hangar Theatre, Prospect Theatre Company, Summer Play Festival, Stageworks/Hudson, Samuel French Short Play Festival, and Stella Adler Studios.

Director Michelle Tattenbaum most recently directed “Peter and the Starcatcher” at Cape Fear Regional Theatre. Previous projects with Itamar Moses include the world premiere of the musical “Nobody Loves You” at the Old Globe (San Diego Theatre Critics Circle nomination: Best Director) and the NY premiere

at Second
Stage.

Tickets are available at lunastage.org/roan, or by calling
973-395-5551.