



'LaVidas' Landlord' is Greek tragedy, by way of El Salvador

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By LAWSON TAITTE / The Dallas Morning News

Lawrence Weinstein requires only a short space of time, a couple of actors and some music and poetry to create a tragedy in *The LaVidas' Landlord*. But then that's all the Greeks needed, right?

The Cambridge, Mass., playwright was in Theatre Three's basement space, Theatre Too!, on Monday for the world premiere of his play. Director Bruce R. Coleman and the company do the new work proud.

Mr. Weinstein structures the piece as a series of letters. In the first act, high school teacher Al Mann (Greg Jackson) has to communicate with his new tenant, Carlos (Sergio Antonio Garcia), in writing because the two work such opposite hours. Carlos, a political refugee from El Salvador, doesn't quite know what to make of Al's notes, filled as they are with cryptic poems.

Al's belief in democracy and equality makes him want to bend over backward to accommodate the new arrival in this country. But misunderstandings soon begin to crop up, and the clash between cultural expectations can grow quite sharp. Al's questionable business decisions are also causing him problems at home.

Things shift in the second act, when Mr. Garcia plays another character, Mr. Munoz, a lawyer. The rhetoric begins to escalate, and so do the complications of the plot.

Going into *The LaVidas' Landlord*, I frankly had reservations about yet another play built out of letters. But this time the device isn't a cop-out to allow performers to do a play without learning lines. It's symbolic. These people express themselves – but they don't really communicate. If anything, the artful use of words in both letters and poems only masks meaning.

Mr. Jackson hasn't done a lot of previous work on area stages, but he's impressive here. He lets us see from the beginning that his character's thoughts and emotions can run away with him, but he also portrays Al's essential good will. As the situation and Al's ability to deal with it begin to deteriorate, Mr. Jackson wisely refuses to exaggerate, even at the play's powerful close.

Mr. Garcia, a Theatre Three regular, takes on a new maturity in his dual role. He doesn't have much opportunity for eloquence as Carlos, but he too builds a character without overdoing things. As Mr. Munoz, Mr. Garcia goes even farther: He gives us a portrait as complex and contradictory and gripping as Mr. Jackson's.

The more you think about *The LaVidas' Landlord*, the deeper and more carefully designed it seems. Mr. Weinstein, a teacher all his life, has planted clues to what he is about all through his piece – and they all point back to Aeschylus and Sophocles.

•Through March 30 at Theatre Too! in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. Runs 100 mins. \$20 to \$30. 214-871-3300, www.theatre3dallas.com.