

Despite Port City's Valiant Effort, 'Stop Kiss' Misses Its Mark

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Sara (Wendy Lamond-Broughton, left) and Callie (Amy Miharu Hard) in an intimate moment.

Sometimes a playwright sabotages herself by adding something to a play that ultimately obscures its message. That's the case with "Stop Kiss," a drama by television writer Diana Son ("The West Wing," "Law and Order: Criminal Intent").

The play is flawed, and even Port City Playhouse, which specializes in intimate dramas, can't save it with its earnest production now onstage in Alexandria.

It's easy to describe "Stop Kiss" as a play about gay-bashing. But it's not. The violence that occurs is just a facet of Son's message that people's identities are not always fixed. They may be fluid, and when other people start putting labels on you, "It is a kind of unexpected violence that jolts you out of the fullness of who you are," Sun said in an interview. But having somebody attach a label, either carelessly or with intent to hurt, is apparently not dramatic enough, so a violent attack was engaged here.

Two seemingly straight women in Manhattan meet and slowly begin to explore a growing attraction. They are opposites in many ways. One is a cynical, longtime New Yorker. The other is fresh from the hinterlands and very much an idealist. New Yorker Callie (Amy Miharu Hard) is passive, both in her dealings with noisy neighbors and in hanging onto a relationship with college chum George (Blakeman Brophy). The relationship is part friendship, part convenient sexual outlet. Sara (Wendy Lamond-Broughton) may be the fresh-faced innocent, but she has enough drive to uproot her life and try to make a difference by teaching at a dangerous Bronx school.

In two-dozen vignettes, Callie and Sara become friends, fight, deal with the men in their lives and dance around what is happening between them. Concurrently, we see the aftermath of a vicious attack, the outlines of which are slowly revealed. Callie is terribly uncomfortable with outsiders trying to label her, whether it's the friendly woman who helped drive off the attacker, or the hard-edged police officer who is trying to find the reason for it. It seems that a simple kiss has caused an irrevocable tag to be put on her, one she may not be sure is meaningful.

When a character you have come to like ends up battered and in a coma, the violent act overshadows all else. If it were a story about gay-bashing, "Stop Kiss" would offer little new, and the subtle message about identity is obscured. Son has not done the audience any favors by cutting her story in half, and then intercutting scenes from the second half into the first. It feels like a gimmick, employed, perhaps, because the story was deemed too tame to have commercial appeal.

Director Zina T. Bleck has Callie off-balance the entire play, so emotionally tentative that it becomes annoying, undercutting the delicate feelings. Sara is usually played by an Asian American, playwright Son's heritage, adding another layer of labeling. But Bleck eliminated that with her choice of Lamond-Broughton, who is white. Lamond-Broughton, nevertheless, creates a multidimensional character.

There are significant production shortcomings. The scenic design looks like someone forgot to build a set and slapped a few pieces of plywood together at the last moment. And the downtime between each vignette is so inexplicably long that it adds about 10 minutes to the play's usual 90-minute run time (without an intermission).

It's a nice try, but this kiss misses its target.

"Stop Kiss," performed by Port City Playhouse, continues through April 8 at the Lee Center Stage, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Performances are scheduled for March 31 and April 2, 4, 7 and 8. Friday, Saturday and Tuesday shows begin at 8 p.m. The Sunday performance is at 3 p.m. For tickets and information, visit <http://www.portcityplayhouse.com> or call 703-838-2880.