

Assisted suicide takes centre stage



Review: *Volunteer Man*
By Christina Kennedy
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For a work that deals with Aids, voluntary euthanasia and homophobia, *Volunteer Man* is a surprisingly upbeat play. That's because these themes merely serve to prepare the canvas for a human drama that's really about the importance of forging emotional connections, no matter how unlikely.

And the two protagonists are certainly improbable allies: one is an abrasive, brash, friendless man dying of an Aids-related illness in hospital; the other is a mousy, introverted gay teacher who has his own reasons for volunteering to visit this stranger during his final weeks and months.

For the second year in a row, Festival audiences are being treated to a play by American playwright Dan Clancy, whose work *The Timekeepers* was staged here last year. And it's the same Israeli theatre group, led by actor-director Roy Horovitz, that is back to engage and entertain anew.

The Timekeepers was also a two-hander that juxtaposed a crusty, aggressive character with a polar opposite personality type, and it also dealt with people finding a common humanity through the clutter of prejudice.

Both plays also skillfully juggle light and humorous moments with episodes of unnerving confrontational drama.

But while *The Timekeepers* was set during the Holocaust,

Volunteer Man takes place very much in the here and now – in New York City.

It won an Obie (Off-Broadway) theatre award and received a GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) nomination for best play, and it's easy to see why.

It is in a sterile hospital bed in the Big Apple, as Tom Waits' dark "malady" *Singapore* sets the soundscape scene and a surly Catholic sister circles like a vulture, where we find a tough-as-nails, cussing, bile-spewing ne'er-do-well (Ezer Kalmovitz) who knows he's dying – and he's such a nasty piece of work we wish he'd hurry up and do it.

Contrasting strongly with him is the gentle, preppy soul (Horovitz) who has volunteered to come and keep him company.

Their unfolding chalk-and-cheese friendship makes for much tension and comedy, and these fireworks are utterly compelling.

Books – be it porn magazines or *War and Peace* – form much of the common ground that helps the characters develop a kind of shared emotional literacy.

The prickly moral issue of assisted suicide is extremely topical, with Cape Town academic Sean Davison due to be tried in New Zealand for the mercy killing of his ailing mother. In the play, the playwright takes a strong stand on whether terminally ill humans should have the agency to choose to die with dignity – or should wait for nature to take its terrible and debilitating course. On occasion, the two actors' rapid-fire delivery and accents render the dialogue indistinct, and this could be slowed down a gear or two without detracting from the overall impact of the play – which does, probably by design, rely on contrasts between explosive, almost inarticulate anger and gentler moments.

But this small qualm does not diminish the fact that *Volunteer Man* is a simple, powerful play that speaks volumes about how it is possible for people to find commonalities across apparently uncrossable divides.

Volunteer Man is at the B2 Arena today at 2pm and 9.30pm