

Critic's Choice

'The Snake Can' takes female bonding to the edge



Diane Cary, left, Sharon Sharth and Jane Kaczmarek peruse dating-site profiles in "The Snake Can." (Ed Krieger)

By David C. Nichols

"Being newly single in middle age.... It's like opening one of those child's toys where the snake pops out of the can." So goes "The Snake Can" at the Odyssey Theatre. Kathryn Graf's wry, insightful dramedy about three longtime girlfriends and their internecine midlife crises surmounts some post-larval structural blips with pertinence, humor and heart.

Meet fetching, successful Meg (Sharon Sharth, funny and convincing), a twice-divorced New Yorker unable to sustain even casual relationships, and her party posse. Nina (Diane Cary, atop her game), left a famous actor spouse to be an artist, using her body instead of paintbrushes. And acne-prone Harriet (the invaluable Jane Kaczmarek), though ambivalent after seven years of widowhood, has joined the Matchmaker.luv website.

With this revelation, "Snake Can" leaves female bonding to explore fairly universal themes of loyalty and loneliness. Enervated Brad (Joel Polis, expert as ever) balks at Meg's sexual advances, to avoid sully what they supposedly have. Sensitive Paul (an assured Gregory Harrison), Nina's not-quite-ex, wants to give what women profess to desire, so where are they? Stephen (James Lancaster, droll and unpredictable), Harriet's dating match-up, is attentive, courtly -- and bisexual, which creates edgy hilarity when flamboyant Jake (Polis) arrives.

Director Steven Robman oversees a smart physical production, particularly designer Hana S. Kin's witty projections, although pacing meanders, with some choppy transitions. Graf hasn't fully achieved seamless cohesion between storylines, and Paul could use a counterpart role akin to Stephen's fantasy personas and the Brad/Jake duality.

Yet Graf's core instincts are sound, the quips and faceoffs suggesting actual human discourse, and Kaczmarek and Harrison form the tonal poles of a wonderful ensemble. See it with someone you love in spite of yourself.

"The Snake Can," Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., L.A. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends Feb. 24. \$20-\$30. (310) 477-2055 Ext. 2 or www.OdysseyTheatre.com. Running time: 2 hours.