

Brothers in Arms

Dying City at Southern Rep

by **Dalt Wonk**, Gambit Theatre Critic

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Kelly (Angelena Swords) sits in a stylish armchair watching television in her New York apartment. Her brother-in-law Peter (Peter McElligott) arrives without warning, and she buzzes him in. He's determined to re-establish contact with his dead brother's widow. He had sent her a letter, but she didn't answer. She even had her phone disconnected to avoid him.

Slowly he stirs up the low-key maelstrom of emotions that drive Christopher Shinn's *Dying City*. Under Julie Hamberg's direction, the acting is superlative and the story fascinating in this first-class production.

Questionable wars are the context of *Dying City* in more ways than one. Peter and his brother Craig suffered under a repressive and inconsistent father who was a Vietnam veteran. Peter and Craig were not only brothers, but identical twins. McElligott plays both roles admirably, distinguishing the two without exaggerating the difference.

Craig was studying at Harvard when he met and married Kelly. He was troubled but determined to serve in the Iraq war. She was studying psychology and is now a practicing therapist. Peter is an actor, currently on stage in a revival of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. It's worth noting he's gay and not pursuing Kelly.

The tone of the play is what you might call modern vernacular. Moments of intense drama are interrupted by trifles, like when Peter announces, "I actually walked offstage tonight in the middle of the show." Kelly responds, "Is your tea OK?" Much emotion is covered over by characters' inability to express themselves in words, although occasionally the effect is forced.

Scenes between Kelly and Peter alternate with flashback scenes between Kelly and Craig. At points, the timeline is confusing, but Craig's death ends the dilemma. Kelly allows Peter to sleep on her couch, but she doesn't want him moving in. Neither will she consent to hear the emails he received from Craig. Peter wants to read them to her, but she stops him. She throws him out of her apartment and, she hopes, out of her life, but that doesn't resolve all of the questions he has raised. Uncertainty hovers over the end of the play as Kelly sits down in the white armchair, picks up the remote and turns on the television. — Dalt Wonk



PHOTO BY JOHN BARRIOS

Dying City

Directed by Julie Hamberg

Starring Angelena Swords and Peter McElligott

8 p.m. Thu.-Sat., Jan. 29-31; 3 p.m. Sun., Feb. 1; through Feb. 8

Southern Rep, The Shops at Canal Place, 333 Canal St., third floor, 522-6545; www.southernrep.com