

THEATER BEAT

'Angry,' but we're not quite sure why

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With the characteristic assurance seen in such previous efforts as the acclaimed "Orson's Shadow," director Matt Shakman smooths the way for Adam Stein's turbulent new play "Angry" at the Black Dahlia Theatre.

The action -- set, at a best guess, in the 1980s -- takes place in an idyllic suburban neighborhood, complete with a celestial backdrop of blue skies in Andrea Finn's nicely wry scenic design.

This deceptively tranquil scene is actually a battleground for the ongoing war between blue-collar security guard Chaz (Ethan Sandler) and his white-collar neighbor Topper (Gabriel Olds). Former childhood friends, Chaz and Topper have been raising their younger siblings, Petey (Isaac Laskin) and J.J. (Kyle Jordan), respectively, ever since their parents departed the scene. (Chaz's parents were killed in a fire; Topper's just left.) The hostilities escalate when a mysterious woman (Allison Krizner), object of both Chaz and Topper's fascination, moves in across the way.

The first act proliferates with earsplitting exchanges -- aggravating, considering the fact that Stein never explains the precise reason for Chaz and Topper's antipathy. Neither does he present a convincing case for just why these two antagonists ultimately bury the hatchet when, to the observer, they finally have a legitimate reason to detest each other.

Still, Shakman is a proven actors' director, and Stein, himself a veteran actor, has written some plum roles that these performers clearly relish. Among the excellent cast, which also features Rob Nagle as the born-again neighborhood mailman, Sandler and Laskin are particular standouts, Sandler as a virginal working guy with a hair-trigger temper, Laskin as his sweet but mentally limited sibling.

Stylistically, Stein's piece is a vivid cartoon, well rendered by these terrific actors. It's when Stein forces his larger-than-life caricatures into predictable crisis that the conceit cloy.

-- F. Kathleen Foley

"Angry," Black Dahlia Theatre, 5453 West Pico Blvd., Los Angeles. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m. Ends Sept. 7. \$18. (866) 468-3399. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.