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Schadenfreude

(The Hollywood Court Theatre: 99 seats; \$15 top) Circle X Theatre Co. presents a play in two acts by Carlos A. Murillo, directed by Jonathan Westerberg; producer, Jacob Sidney.

Friedrich Nietzsche - Thomas Redding
Paul Ree/ Joseph Goebbels - Jeff Marlowe
Lou Salome/Mother - Suzanne Pirret
Elizabeth Nietzsche - Bridget White
Bernhard Forster - Rob Nagle
Morgenstern - Marius Mazmanian

By [JULIO MARTINEZ](#)

The Circle X Theatre Co. has established an admirable reputation for preeming legit works, including the last two Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle original play award-winners, "Louis Slotin Sonata" (1999) and "Inflagrante Gothicto" (2000). Carlos A. Murillo's unfocused, meandering sojourn into the troubled personal lives of 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his monumentally manipulative sister Elizabeth is not up to its standards.

The playwright has imagined a macabre sequence of events in the lives of these siblings, beginning with their mutual disapproval of each other's love interests and ending with Elizabeth (Bridget White) as the single-minded caretaker and interpreter of her brother's disease-ravaged soul. A potentially capable ensemble struggles with the playwright's awkward premise and is not helped by director Jonathan Westerberg's untextured, flatline staging.

Murillo has his way with some well-chronicled historical facts. During the early 1880s, Nietzsche (Thomas Redding), already famous throughout Europe, had spurned his earlier association with composer Richard Wagner's anti-Semitic idolization of "German tradition" and allied himself with Paul Ree (Jeff Marlow), the French Jewish moralist. It was through Ree that Nietzsche met and fell hopelessly in love with the beautiful, brilliant and free-spirited 21-year-old Lou Salome (Suzanne Pirret), who would go on to become the mistress of poet Rainer-Maria Rilke and a protégé of Sigmund Freud.

Elizabeth's vehemently jealous reaction to Jewish born Salome, combined with Friedrich's abhorrence of Elizabeth's

grotesquely anti-Semitic husband Bernhard Forster (Rob Nagle) soon sends everyone fleeing in different directions. Elizabeth and Forster are off to Paraguay to establish a utopian Aryan colony. Salome rejects Nietzsche and begins an unworkable, platonic alliance with Ree as aesthetic wanderers of Europe. And Nietzsche begins his slow descent into mental collapse, punctuated by cathartic emotional bouts with his mother (also Pirret), who can never forgive him for not going into the clergy like his father.

The term "schadenfreude" literally means "malicious joy," but driving motivation of this work is angst. Every action springs from it and never evolves beyond it. Elizabeth's loneliness angst drives her to beg Forster to share his bed. He's too angst-ridden to comply. Later, her disillusionment angst has her casually coaxing her husband into committing suicide.

Suicide is just the thing for Ree when his unrequited love angst for Salome becomes unbearable. And Nietzsche himself endures a bottomless pit of angst as his trapped mind must endure Elizabeth's promotion of his work as the fountainhead for the eventual rise of Hitler and the Third Reich.

The cast struggles gamely with Murillo's text, including his inexplicable use of such contemporary references as cell phones and tape recorders as objects of everyday use during the 19th century. Particularly successful is Nagle's incredibly haughty Forster, whose inept failure as a colonialist reduces him to the state of bumbling idiocy. Also effective is Marius Mazmanian's turn as Morgenstern, the Machiavellian overseer to Forster's Paraguayan paradise. Sets, Michael Allen; costumes, Marina Leone; lights, Michael E.R. Habicht; sound, Jason Brice. Opened May 4, reviewed May 11; closes June 2. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MINS.