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Safety

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By Madeleine Shaner

Chris Thorpe's darkly engrossing play frames a debate that will remain on the table as long as there are disasters, wars, and violence, as long as man's inhumanity to man is writ large enough to extend, quite fittingly "to the last syllable of recorded time." In a superbly realized performance, John Montana is Michael, a war photographer who has made a name for himself with his disturbing images from the battlefields of the topsy-turvy world he inhabits by choice and by vocation. He doesn't fight the wars; he doesn't fire off killer mortar rounds; he shoots prize-winning photographs of the moment of men's dying. He's well compensated for it, wins awards, and warrants prestigious retrospectives of his work.

Michael has no ethical or moral stance in his place in the universe until he's faced with something he can't understand, analyze, or photograph: When his child falls into a lake, his primary impulse is to get that perfect shot. The girl is saved from drowning by a stranger, Sean (Mac Brandt), an awkward young man with an obvious secret, as alienated from the real world as Michael, who never even reads a newspaper. But Sean's first instinct is to jump in the lake and tow the child back to land. Is it action or reaction that distinguishes the hero? Is it the preservation of life or the photographic reminders of it that count? Michael's wife, Susan (a beautifully efficient Peggy Goss), is as attracted to the strange young man as she once was to the combat photographer, whose gloss has worn off after years of combat fatigue, absentee fatherhood, and casual infidelities. Celebrity interviewer Tanya (Katrina Lenk), swayed by Michael's amazing relationship with battlefield glamour, finds him as irresistible as Susan once did.

Initially, the characters appear to be talking to themselves in a series of complex solo investigations. It's not until the play jells into inevitable conflicts between the primary characters that the horror of war emerges; then it becomes intensely painful, and personal, as we're led into the psychological back alleys of the mind. It's tough stuff, eloquently portrayed, simplistically set by Russ Borski, and stylishly directed by Peter Forster.

Presented by Closet Space Theater at the McCadden Place Theatre, 1157 N. McCadden Pl., Hollywood. Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Jan. 12-Feb. 18. (818) 780-0661.

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