

THEATER BEAT

Sisters through thick and thin

As a snapshot of Harlem in 1943, John Henry Redwood's "The Old Settler" evokes some historical artifacts that have faded into obscurity — party-line telephones, the Savoy Ballroom — and others that stubbornly endure in more camouflaged form, i.e., segregationist tactics that stack the economic deck.

Nevertheless, Redwood's 1998 romantic dramedy is first and foremost a humanist work with a vision of endurance and connectedness that transcends race and politics, and its best qualities are admirably served in William Stanford Davis' fine staging at the Pico Playhouse.

Crisp, naturalistic dialogue and tight classical construction drive the generation-spanning love affair between Elizabeth (Ruby Hinds), a middle-aged spinster, and none-too-subtly named Husband (John R. Davidson), the much younger recent arrival from South Carolina renting a room in her tenement apartment. Their budding romance arouses deep resentment in Elizabeth's younger sister Quilly, played with a nuanced balance of selfishness and protectiveness by Jolie Oliver, whose impeccable comic timing perfectly complements Hinds' stoic dignity.

Hinds and Davidson handle their relationship story with a touching simplicity that minimizes the artifice in its predictable soap opera trajectory. Even more melodrama limits the effect of Husband's prior love interest (Crystal Garrett), a Jese-



By KENNETH

RESENTMENT AND protectiveness characterize the relationship between sisters Elizabeth (Ruby Hinds), left, and Quilly (Jolie Oliver) in "The Old Settler"

bel figure straight out of a chitlin' circuit morality play.

What elevates this revival is the riveting interplay between Oliver and Hinds as the estranged siblings facing deep-seated conflicts with naked emotional honesty — there's no plot safety net to coast on here. As icing on the cake, the songs threaded through the play showcase Hinds' background as an opera singer — by the end she had me wishing for an encore.

— PHILIP BRANDEN

"The Old Settler," Pico Playhouse, 10508 Pico Blvd., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends Oct. 27. \$32. (323) 960-7712 or www.playsell.com/oldsettler. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.

A bold approach to 'Red's' Rothko

Just what hasn't Tony Abatemarco done in his several decades as a performer? Certainly he has established himself as a performer of the first rank over the years in an incredibly varied array of roles.

Now Abatemarco takes

on the challenge of portraying Mark Rothko in "Red," John Logan's Tony-winning two-person drama about that Titanic, troubled Abstract Expressionist in the late 1950s, in the years before his 1970 suicide.

The play is essentially a Socratic interchange between Rothko and his studio assistant, Ken (Patrick Stanford), in a sensitive, savvy turn, an aspiring artist who has been hired to aid Rothko in the mammoth task of assembling a series of 30 huge paintings for the newly constructed Seagram Building's Four Seasons Restaurant.

Initially cowed by his frangible master, Ken eventually challenges Rothko's choleric observations with some harsh home truths of his own, namely that Rothko's outspoken contempt for artistic commercialism rings false, especially in light of his lucrative current commission. Of course, Rothko famously reneged on the Four Seasons deal, returning the cash and farming out his "Seagram Murals" to other, more established institutions.

Tony Award aside, Logan's segue into trumped-up tragedy — Ken's monologue about a bloody childhood trauma — seems misplaced

in this context. Mostly, and most fortunately, the play is a dazzling examination of artistic obsession, a fast-paced verbal duel beautifully orchestrated in Caryn Desai's subtly escalating staging.

The role of Rothko was famously created by Alfred Molina, first in London and later on Broadway and last year at the Mark Taper Forum. Comparisons may be odious, but they are inevitable, and Abatemarco's declamatory theatricality contrasts poorly with Molina's more organically muted portrayal, at least initially.

While Molina was almost wholly rancorous and narcissistic, Abatemarco is more avuncular and accessible. It's certainly a bold approach, with a softening of sentimentality that rounds out Rothko's rough edges, yet at some detriment to his doomed character's lacerating prickliness.

— E. KATHLEEN FOLEY

"Red," International City Theatre, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends Sept. 15. \$38-\$45. (562) 436-4600. www.internationalcitytheatre.com. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.