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Jeanne Claire van Ryzin is the arts critic for the Austin American-Statesman where she has worked since 1999. She moved to Austin from New York City in 1986. Her work has appeared in Architecture, Art Papers, Dwell and The Review of Contemporary Fiction, among other publications. When she is not busy seeing things in Austin, she travels to see even more things.

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Review: 'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery'

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin | Monday, November 2, 2009, 12:51 PM

It's a not a spoiler to say that everyone dies by the end of 'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery,' a new musical play by Elizabeth Doss, a co-production of Vortex Repertory-Tutto Theatre Company.

Dying — well, murder — gets going from the get-go in this free-spirited if problematic production directed by Dustin Wills.

Doss, Wills and set designer Lisa Laratta place this wanna-be allegory in a stylized world that's a kind of bayou/Southern gothic. Actors cavort in a shallow pool center stage or climb the sprawling platform structure that rings the center seating section. A motley four-piece bluegrass band strolls around, acting as clowns and chorus both. There's a husband-killing tough ol' gal, legendary murderer Stagger Lee, a Bonnie and Clyde-esque young couple and a pair of young backwoods sisters whose crashing boredom leads to — oh, take a guess.

The dead and the living, the past and the present, are intimately intertwined in Doss and Wills' Americana vaudeville-esque setting. And Mark Stewart and Andy Tindall's twangy bluegrass music provides the aural atmosphere in the perpetually half-lit world. And the ensemble cast is full of energetic acting.

But with little linearity to it, 'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery' trades a little too much on atmosphere. Plenty is suggested and yes, quirky, delightful scenario after quirky, delightful scenario is unveiled and presented for our consideration.

But as imaginative as each of those scenarios are, they lack a kind of friction with each other. Never quite able to stick together, the individual pieces of 'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery' just miss at being a whole.

'Murder Ballad Murder Mystery' continues through Nov. 7. www.tuttotheatre.org

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