

What unfolds is a tough, gritty play that rarely falls into the embrace of its own clichés

'Duet for One' strikes an exquisite note

By Jay Reiner

Daily News Theater Critic

A two-character play is a risky sort of work. If we tire of one of the characters in the first 10 minutes, there's nowhere to seek help except the nearest exit.

A two-character play in which one character has an incurable disease and the other is cast in the role of healer sounds still more problematic. The inspirational map of the evening is apt to look familiar even before we take our seat.

But maps and numbers can be deceiving, and in the case of Tom Kempinski's "Duet for One" — which originated at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys — they're fairly worthless indicators of what the play has in store. Kempinski has written a tough, gritty little play that rarely falls into the embrace of its own clichés.

"Duet for One" is loosely based on the true story of concert cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who was struck with multiple sclerosis at the height of her career. In Kempinski's version the character's name is Stephanie Abrahams, she's a concert violinist, and she visits a psychiatrist shortly after her illness has ended her playing days. As far as Abrahams is concerned, she's coping quite nicely, thank you, but her husband has asked her to come and, yes, she is feeling just a bit "low."

Denial of this magnitude is a psychiatrist's meat and potatoes. The

good doctor isn't buying his patient's rosy picture of her dilemma no matter how much energy she spends trying to convince him.

This initial battle of wits is probably the key to the play's grip on us. Abrahams' arguments on her own behalf — her self-assured optimism about her future — have the ring of truth so that for a while we begin to wonder if she isn't right. Perhaps the doctor really is some treacherous shrink out to earn his \$150 an hour by planting seeds of self-doubt in his susceptible patient.

But soon enough it becomes clear that Abrahams' facade is just that — a well-scripted defense against her own despair. The battle between these two before they reach this understanding is the true journey of the play. And there is no tidy resolution to spoil the insights we gather along the way.

Linda Kelsey brings an astonishing range of passion and intensity to the role of Abrahams. It's an operatic part calling for spectacular arias of emotion, and Kelsey is up to all of them. At the other end of the scale, Allan Miller's quiet, compassionate psychiatrist is equally affecting. Ron Satiol is the director of this exquisite "Duet."

"Duet for One" is playing at the Hollywood Playhouse & Cafe, 1445 N. Las Palmas Ave., Hollywood. Performances are Tuesday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m., for an indefinite run. Tickets are \$20 to \$22.50. For reservations, call (213) 480-3232.



Linda Kelsey stars as a concert violinist struck with multiple sclerosis and Allan Miller is her psychiatrist in "Duet for One."