

Dance Club Frivolity, Post 9/11 . . .

BY COREY TAKAHASHI
STAFF WRITER

Charles Messina's new play, "The Battle," doesn't have a subtitle, nor does it need one. That said, "Living in a Code-Yellow World" wouldn't be far off the mark, if it didn't imply so much doom.

Messina's scrappy Off-Broadway production, which debuts Friday, unfolds inside a New York nightclub and depicts the social Darwinism of the dance floor — and the ultimate triviality of this battle between the sexes in the midst of a larger, climatic one looming nearby. Messina says he was moved to write the play after hearing about the deadly attacks on nightclubs in Tel Aviv in 2001 and in Bali in 2002. A post-9/11 sensibility also infuses the work.

"I want to ask the question 'What becomes of frivolity after tragedy?' I mean, how do we go back to what we were before?" says Messina during a rehearsal at Jim Bonney Studio, the 50-seat Chelsea acting space where the play will be staged. "Where did we all go from 9/11? Could we still go to clubs, could we still have sex, could we still care about MTV?"

Questions of varying magnitude, to be sure, and that's part of Messina's point. "How does that battle [on the dance floor] hold up versus the battle that's waiting just outside the door, that ultimately comes into their world."

As seen in a growing number of creative works, notably the play "The Guys," which had a successful run Off-Broadway and now has been turned into a film, or Spike Lee's "25th Hour," terror anxiety has trickled down to many routine aspects of city life. "It's probably a reality we're gonna live with for a very long time," says 31-year-old Messina, who is not a club-goer (he's a married father) but imagines the experience provoking similar thoughts of mortality as when he rides the subway or crosses a bridge. "There's nobody who's going to be in a crowded club, who isn't going to think, 'What if?' for the



Newsday Photo / Michael E. Ach

A scene in "The Battle," opening Friday at the Jim Bonney Studio in Manhattan

there's a fire, what if there's a stampede, what if a bomb goes off?"

The more recent, accidental deaths at nightclubs in West Warwick, R.I., and Chicago came after Messina and co-director Jim Bonney were well into rehearsals, but they, too, give the production an eerie timeliness.

"It's so current, it's unbelievable," says Bonney, 55. "In fact, it's too current."

In another era, you might imagine Messina's characters as simple updates of "Saturday Night Fever's" Tony Manero. Just before chaos creeps in, that's how we see them: a collection of hormone-raging New Yorkers bent on hooking up, gloating over petty social one-upmanship, dispensing outer-borough bon mots in the areas of male and female psychology and sex.

The exceptions are Ricky Anne and John John, who've been dragged to the meat market by their friends and appear more Midwest than midtown. They seek substance, honesty and love while everyone around them wants simply to score.

Messina, best known for writing and directing "Mercury: The Afterlife and Times of a Rock God," calls "The Battle" a "tribute to survival," though it's just as much a sociology of shallow 20-somethings looking for love under all the wrong auspices. "I don't think at the end of this show these characters say, 'We've done the wrong thing by being materialistic and superficial.' I just think it has given them a moment to pause, the same kind of moment we've all had

Messina says "The Battle" marks his contribution to the dialogue over who we are in a shaken city. A lifelong New Yorker, he grew up in Greenwich Village and was displaced from his TriBeCa home, whose terrace faces Ground Zero, for more than two months following the Twin Towers' collapse.

"Every generation has had their challenge, and I feel like this is our challenge," he says of creatively interpreting Sept. 11 and its social aftermath. "As long as we don't get killed, this is, like, a great time to be alive."

"The Battle" runs through April 6, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 3 p.m. Admission is \$15. The Jim Bonney Studio, 134 W. 26th St., in Manhattan. 212-252-6910.

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