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THEATER REVIEW

Making a persuasive case for a serial killer

'Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen'

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Cynthia Ettinger, left, and Adele Robbins at Actors' Gang. (Carlos Chavez / LAT)

"Honey, I killed a man today." That blank statement hardly indicates the sardonic force of "Self Defense or, death of some salesmen" at the Actors' Gang. The West Coast premiere of Carson Kreitzer's 2001 fantasia about executed murderer Aileen Wuornos is stunning, true political theater with a visceral punch.

"Self Defense," which concludes Kreitzer's "Women Who Kill" triptych, pulls no punches. Its narrative rails at the skewered society that (inaccurately) dubbed Wuornos "America's first female serial killer." The media-driven voyeurism obscured arguments of self-defense raised

by an unspeakably abused, profoundly damaged hooker; also, that slayings of prostitutes abated during Wuornos' Florida killing spree. Kreitzer finds pertinent substance within her concentrated didactic sights. The post-feminist volleys carry the courage of Kreitzer's convictions about the convict who motivated them, and land with uncanny artistic aim.

A culpable accomplice is director Beth F. Milles, whose staging ranks among the Gang's finest outings. Sybil Wickersheimer's fantastic set incorporates strip-club poles, giant vertical blinds and junk food detritus. Alix Hester's costumes enable character

shifts with cinematic fluidity. Adam H. Greene's lighting and John Zalewski's sound are indispensable.

So is the ensemble, spinning around the axis formed by Cynthia Ettinger's searing serial killer, here renamed Jolene Palmer. Less physically ravaged than Wuornos (or Charlize Theron in her Oscar-nominated "Monster" film turn), Ettinger's Jolene embodies tormented id, radiating acuity, panic, pathos and rage in a revelatory performance. Aimie Billon, Blaire Chandler, Dina Platias and Adele Robbins are marvelous in multiple roles. Ken Elliott, Tom Fitzpatrick

and Gary Kelley fulfill their duties with distinction.

Some observers may find that the emphasis on Wuornos vs. America's double standards on rape and prostitution relegates her seven victims to clinical gristle. Yet "Self Defense" never trivializes the murders, or excuses Wuornos for pulling the trigger. The scorching issues raised by "Self Defense" defy simple response, but the airtight forces voicing them here are no less complex in their excellence.