

CRITIC'S CHOICE

THEATER REVIEW

Little moments that add up

The absorbing "Nibroc" tales rise above the ordinariness of small-town life.

By Daryl H. Miller, Times Staff Writer

On a crowded train in December 1940, a young man in uniform spots an open seat next to a young woman, asks permission to join her, then cheerfully pesters her with conversation until she comes out from behind the book-cover battlement of the novel she's reading.

As setups go, it's almost ridiculously simple, yet as the man and woman get to know each other, the delicate details of their exchange — his easy grin, her watchful caution — accumulate into patterns so familiar that we soon feel as though we're eavesdropping on our parents, or perhaps our younger selves.

Soon, we're impatient to learn what happens next between Raleigh and May. Fortunately, there are three plays' worth of stories to be shared in Arlene Hutton's "Nibroc" tales, presented in repertory by Actors Co-op in Hollywood. The first play, "Last Train to Nibroc," has been warmly embraced in previous Los Angeles presentations, including an Actors Co-op production last year. The second, "See Rock City," is new to the West Coast, and the third, "Gulf View Drive," is a world premiere.

These aren't epic stories; they're accumulations of little moments, as when Gary Clemmer, portraying Raleigh, keeps glancing sideways to see whether he's got May smiling yet.

"You keep teasing me," Staci Michelle Armao's May only half-protests.

"Just looking for the brighter side," he replies.

Raleigh's playfulness, even temper and quiet perception quickly identify him as one of life's good guys.

May is more of a mystery. She's quick to voice opinions, often through a mask of stony disapproval. She can be fretful, rash and inconsiderate. Rarely does she let such behavior go unevaluated, though, because moments, days or even months later, she'll come back with a reformulated response that reflects genuineness, faithfulness and enormous capacity for love.

The plays unfold, respectively, from late 1940 through spring 1943, June 1944 through August 1945, and fall 1953 through spring 1954. Big moments in history — the U.S. entry into World War II, the dropping of atom bombs — sweep the globe while Raleigh, who's deemed unable to serve because of a medical condition, and May resign themselves to the ordinariness of life in small Kentucky towns they thought they'd left behind.

The trilogy's moniker comes from a backward spelling of one of those towns, Corbin, and its Nibroc Festival, a key reference point in the first play.

New York-based actress-director-producer Beth Lincks, who writes under the Hutton pseudonym, has said that the plays borrow personality types and stories from her own eastern Kentucky family, expanded and fictionalized into the tale of Raleigh and May.

The second play introduces May's mother (Linda Kerns), an intuitive, openhearted woman who sees people's potential and nurtures it along, and Raleigh's mom (Bonnie Bailey-Reed), a deeply opinionated, sour-faced woman with all the subtlety of a bulldozer.

Raleigh's sister, Treva (Deborah Lynn Meier), shows up in the third play to pump some rebellious spirit into the proceedings.

A handful of Hutton's flourishes lend dramatic punch but strain believability, especially in the first and third plays. And the third play, touching as it is, needs another write-through focused on character and plot refinement. Most of the time, though, the stories — directed by Nan McNamara, overseeing the first two plays, and Marianne Savell, in charge of the third — are absolutely absorbing. This quiet power is what will plant theatergoers in the yards designed by Gary Lee Reed and turn this into one of the fall's big word-of-mouth events.

Raleigh yearns to be a writer; May burns with a missionary's zeal to help people. Physical and social barriers sometimes stand in their way, but, as Raleigh says to May, "We've got each other. We've got everything we need."