Life is a battle zone with a dark comic spin in

‘Hummingbird Wars’ at Delray theater

By Hap Erstein
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For more than two decades, playwright Carter W. Lewis has been taking the social temperature of the nation, measuring the zeitgeist and shaping his observations into entertaining, if challenging, theatrical statements.

And of those plays that have been seen at Florida Stage and The Theatre at Arts Garage — artistic director Louis Tyrrell has been one of Lewis’s most loyal and frequent champions — his latest work, “The Hummingbird Wars,” is surely his most downbeat view of who we are now.

Like the noble hummingbird, which expends so much energy flapping its wings that it is always just a few hours away from expiring, Lewis posits that we as a species are having a hard time keeping up with the threats, large and small, to our daily lives.

Consider Mel and Warren and their archetypal family, residents of suburban Minneapolis. She never met a social cause she was not passionate about, while he — a recent veteran of the Afghanistan war — is so disinterested in the outside world that he never leaves his house. All Warren wants is to get a straight answer from his cable television company, a simple yet unattainable goal.

The proliferation of firearms in our country is one of the topics preying on Lewis’s mind. Mel and Warren’s teenage son Pete keeps finding guns around the house, and they get progressively larger and more lethal. If these sudden appearances of armaments start to give the play a surreal tone, you ain’t seen nothing yet.

Completing the household unit is Pete’s older sister Kate and her lesbian lover Tracy, who moves in with the family. Alas, Tracy suffers from a respiratory condition aggravated by the increasingly toxic environment. In the highly theatrical world of “Hummingbird Wars,” her condition is represented by hands coming through the kitchen walls, squeezing Tracy tightly. Unless that is not a metaphor and there really are hands and arms embedded in the walls.

Meanwhile, Mel is all worked up over a corporate encroachment into the neighborhood, and she heads off to lead a protest of the bulldozers clearing land. And in a tip of the hat to Eugene Ionesco’s “The Chairs,” Warren’s efforts to get the cable company to send him a box to pack up the equipment he disconnected are eventually rewarded and his kitchen becomes overrun with boxes. Hummingbirds have it easy compared to these folks.

Director Greg Johnson, imported from Montana Repertory Theatre, and his design team give Lewis all the apocalyptic imagery he could ask for. The resourceful Michael Amico contributes a cookie-cutter house that gets reduced to shambles, just like its occupants’ lives, and lighting designer David Nail tosses in a dandy lightning storm.

Heading the cast as Warren, whose return stateside did not remove him from a battle zone, is Todd Allen Durkin, South Florida’s resident nebbish Everyman. Jeni Hacker takes on a rare non-musical role as his wife Mel, who all but foams at the mouth over injustices that need righting. And a trio of capable young actors — Andrew Griner, Jr., Gretchen Porro and Joline Mujica — fill out the cast well.

“The Hummingbird Wars” may take a pessimistic view of the world, but Lewis finds way to give disaster a dark comic spin. And while it all takes place at The Arts Garage, it definitely feels like the good old days of Florida Stage.