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GIMME SHELTER Gazzaniga, left, seeks refuge from her abusive husband.

So Close

By Marin Gazzaniga.
Dir. Michael Sexton. With ensemble cast. Walkerspace (see Off-Off Broadway).

While reading the newspaper or watching *Cops*, you may have wondered, How can women stay with men who beat them? "It's like getting a blood transfusion a drop at a time," Claire, the sweetly skittish center of *So Close*, explains. "The next thing you know, it's not your blood anymore. You look in the mirror, you don't recognize what you see." Likewise, Marin Gazzaniga's deft dissection of domestic abuse transforms the way you view "issue drama." *So Close* looks at the phenomenon of abusive relationships from a multiplicity of angles—from the violent husband to the court clerk. The cumulative effect is a prismatic portrait of how frighteningly easy it is to live with physical torment.

Playwright-actor Gazzaniga has been an editor and a communications

director for Victim Services, and her unfussy writing has a journalistic exactness. Claire takes up with Joey (John Ellison Conlee from *The Full Monty*, showing his dramatic chops), a hard-drinking musician who unloads his anger on her and then abjectly apologizes. With the help of therapists and social workers (all played with no-nonsense precision by the excellent Perri Gaffney), Claire begins the agonizing process of leaving Joey and seeking legal help.

Director Michael Sexton crafts a fine production. He sets the story—told mostly in monologues and direct address—in a dismal institutional waiting room for battered women. As five people wait for appointments and a receptionist-guard reads a paper at his desk, each actor takes on multiple parts to play the characters in Claire's tale. The dual-layer approach serves to make Claire's story, in effect, everybody's story, and that's the true power of this humane look at inhuman behavior.—David Cote

DON'T MISS...

Assassins

(Studio 54; see Broadway) The revival of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's blistering musical about presidential killers is murderously good fun.

BUG

(Barrow Street Theatre; see Off Broadway) A waitress and a conspiracy-theory-minded drifter fall in love and go insane in Tracy Letts's gloriously lurid noir.

Caroline, or Change

(Eugene O'Neill Theatre; see Broadway) Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's brilliant musical explores civil rights and wrongs.

Gypsy

(Shubert Theatre; see Broadway) It's your last week to catch Sam Mendes's revival of this powerhouse musical, starring the superb Bernadette Peters.



So Close

Light Raise the Roof

(New York Theatre Workshop; see Off Broadway) Daring social dramatist Kia Corthron unearths the lives of homeless people.

So Close

(Walkerspace; see Off-Off Broadway) Battered women and their husbands have their say in this riveting theatrical essay.