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THE TWELVE DATES OF CHRISTMAS at the Old Joint Stock, Birmingham
Will Amott 10/12/14

That time of year has come around again, when one cannot escape the signs – yes, it's cold, yes, it's snowing (or raining, by Blighty's standards), yes, there's twinkling lights and "German" markets in every city centre and yes, Starbucks have their gingerbread latte in stock. Yuletide joy and commercialisation saturates every inch of day-to-day life. A trip to the theatre is no different, neither for Mary (Sarah Gain), employed as the Ghost of Christmas Pissed in A Christmas Carol, nor for us. Thankfully, this production was a gift greater than the usual sock-drawer replenishments.

Mary opens the play by telling us she usually loves Christmastime, but for the Thanksgiving just gone, her fiancé had said he could not join her as he was feeling unwell after eating 'some bad chicken.' She then saw him locking lips with a plastic-looking co-worker on national television at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. That bad chicken cost him quite a woman, as the audience discovers. She leads us on her dating (mis)adventures from one Christmas to the next. Twelve months, twelve dates. You see now that the title isn't suggesting a particularly raucous fortnight. Sarah Gain is full of warmth on stage. It would be a hard job to dislike her Mary, even as she impetuously ignores her mother's phone calls. She is engaging and fun, camp and vulnerable in equal measure. Her voice work is great, too: accents and tones aplenty.

A key emotional moment, early on in the play, sold as humour, comes when Mary has to be terribly happy for someone else while terribly sad herself. Her hysteria is hard not to laugh at but it means that the quieter moments later on hold more poignancy and have more punch.

The direction is simple but effective here. However, the songs used are somewhat predictable and the gingerbread men are a kitsch touch in what could be seen in already quite a cutesy production, but they do help to pin down the narrative. The play appears to be moving towards an overly saccharine conclusion and indeed, a sense of dread looms amongst the Grinches and Scrooges as the dates are ticked off one by one. The mantra 'this is not a Hollywood movie' gets repeated, although that now appears to be a trope itself.

Luckily, this is not a present wrapped up neatly with a bow. There's a sense of hope and of good things to come, but we know as well as Mary does that there can be calamity round every corner. Somehow, the play makes that seem like a comfort.

★★★☆☆ Will Amott 10/12/14