

BWW Review: THE TWELVE DATES OF CHRISTMAS

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By Jeffrey Ellis

Rebekah Durham is not Reese Witherspoon, so no one is paying her a million bucks to star in some holiday-themed rom com - but make no mistake about it, they damn well oughta be! But for now, Nashville theater-goers are the lucky ones; we get to see her onstage in Tennessee Women's Theater Project's first-ever Christmastime production: Ginna Hoben's *The Twelve Dates of Christmas*, a thoroughly delightful and wonderfully entertaining one-woman show that offers up some universal truths (we all have a waiter Rob in our life's backstory) for this or any other season.

One of the region's most capable and appealing actors, Durham is given the opportunity to show off her consummate skill and altogether impressive stage presence in Hoben's perfectly scripted piece about a young woman's search for love amid the realities of life in the 21st century. As versatile a performer as you could ever hope to see onstage, Durham brings all of Hoben's lovingly crafted and well-defined characters to life as she tells the story of a year in the life of Mary, a struggling actress of sorts who's pursuing her career in New York City while maintaining close, if somewhat tenuous, ties with her loving family back home in Ohio.

As a matter of fact, we first meet Mary on Thanksgiving morning, while she watches the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV (the rest of the folks are off on a restorative walk around the neighborhood ahead of the carbohydrate-loading that typifies the American celebration of giving thanks for all the bounties we supposedly enjoy) when, for the briefest flash of a moment she sees her fiancé onscreen snogging some bleached-blonde bimbo from his office. Only the day before, he had cancelled plans to join in the holiday celebration with Mary's family (for the first time, for Pete's sake, pinning it on some bad chicken) and so his cover's blown, Mary's storybook romance won't have its fairytale ending and her sister (whom she loves dearly, mind you) has just become engaged herself.

Didn't we see this same plotline play out on *Sex and the City*? Clearly, we've seen tales of romance gone awry and relationships ending for similar reasons before, but thankfully what sets *The Twelve Dates of Christmas* apart from those previous experiences is one obvious element: Hoben's clever way with words and her honest portrayal of Mary's life, stories told with such universal good humor and a frank assessment of what life is really like that you cannot help but identify with her romantic travails, familial discontent and all the wacky men who come and go from her life's orbit.

Mary's stories are funny and heartfelt, genuine and true in a way that signifies Hoben as a master storyteller, one who has the ability to make even the most mundane seem interesting and the simplest of events are fodder of a tear-stained memory. She is swell.

And, so too is Durham, who is directed with a sense of style and forthrightness - despite her romantic entanglements, Mary knows exactly who she is - by TWTP founder and artistic director Maryanna Clarke. Together they bring the scriptbound words to vivid, colorful life with nary one extraneous moment or stagey sleight of hand to weigh down our trip through Mary's year of dates gone wrong and men who don't quite live up to their advance billing.

Durham carries the show in almost disarming fashion, which obviously belies the responsibility of such an assignment, moving from one character to the next with an easy grace that is fascinating and rather mesmerizing. She never lets us see her sweat, even while she's doing all the heavy lifting associated with performing a one-woman show.

Durham delivers her lines knowingly and with a sense of humor and pacing that engages her audience effortlessly. Her stage presence captivates and intrigues, ensuring that by the end of the evening you'll be just a little bit in love with both women - Mary, our fictionalized heroine, and Rebekah Durham, the actor and star, who together bring cheer and sentiment to a holiday season filled with longing and hope.

The Twelve Dates of Christmas. By Ginna Hoben. Directed by Maryanna Clarke. Presented by Tennessee Women's Theatre Project at the Z. Alexander Looby Theatre, Nashville. Through December 13. For details, go to www.TWTP.org. Running time: 90 minutes, with no intermission. <http://www.broadwayworld.com/nashville/>