

## Theater review: 'The Twelve Dates of Christmas' at N.C. Stage

Mountain Xpress

by Kai Elijah Hamilton

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With the Hallmark Channel's "Countdown to Christmas" in full swing, there's no shortage of cheesy, romantic stories this season. N.C. Stage Company is showcasing one that's absolutely not to be missed: *The Twelve Dates of Christmas* by Ginna Hoben is onstage through Saturday, Dec. 23.

Mary (played by Maria Buchanan) is not having a very merry Christmas. While watching the Thanksgiving parade on television, she catches her fiancé locking lips with another woman. So, Mary drops her engagement ring in the Salvation Army donation bucket and swears off the holidays. She attempts to distract her sorrows with her lackluster New York City acting career, but her concerned family won't let her be. Attempting to put herself back out there, Mary ventures trepidatiously into the dating scene and, one by one, tells us all about a string of losers as she decorates her Christmas tree.

Remarkably, this one-woman show runs nearly 1 1/2 hours before we even notice. Although the show could be cast many different ways, it is difficult to imagine a more viable choice. The high-spirited Buchanan is a jubilation. She has the classic girl-next-door look, often found in Hallmark films, yet Buchanan turns such a ubiquitous vision on its head. Casting her was a smart move.

As written, Mary may be someone we can all relate to, but Buchanan's character is fully realized and her own creation. She is not just spouting funny lines and large chunks of dialogue. The character grows as the play goes on. Buchanan's Mary turns into a hip bad-ass and then into a wiser version of that vulnerable girl we first met.

It's apparent that Buchanan put hard labor into this role. What's amazing is how we can picture every single scene that's being told to us. There's an energy emanating from Buchanan that puts us in her vision. Not missing a beat, she takes on more than a dozen characters and is absolutely hilarious.

Director Callan White, so memorable as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at N.C. Stage in 2016, has constructed a production worthy of a sellout. Any show with very few actors inevitably becomes intimate and personal. At the same time, Buchanan wows us with her verve. Given that, a little more audience interaction would have worked wonders. Most impressively, the different character transitions are well-defined by both actor and director.

With its brassy adult language, Hoben's script is delicious. The only things missing are longer moments of heartache and darker drama. However, when Mary wanders into a cathedral at an emotional low, tears well in the audience. This part is very moving, and Buchanan makes the most of it.

The scenic design by Julie K. Ross is functional but, for better or for worse, a little on the tacky side. Also, each time the cool sound design by Charlie Flynn-McIver is slammed on, the audience jolted — humorous, yes, but not intentionally. These are very minor issues, though.

The Twelve Dates of Christmas would make a great date play. With its rebellious humor and sense of hope, it also has the power to satisfy the lonely heart yearning for a little holiday romance.

WHAT: The Twelve Dates of Christmas

WHERE: N.C. Stage Company, 15 Stage Lane, [ncstage.org](http://ncstage.org)

WHEN: Through Saturday, Dec. 23. Wednesdays-Saturdays, at 7:30 p.m., Sundays and Saturday, Dec. 23, at 2 p.m. \$16-\$34