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Real-life breakup inspires one-woman play

By Richard Ades Nov. 20, 2012

Dating a writer can be hazardous to your reputation. Do her wrong, and you might end up being immortalized in song, verse or prose.

Just ask Jake Gyllenhaal, Joe Jonas or any of Taylor Swift's other exes.

Ginna Hoben, a Bishop Hartley graduate who's now an actor and playwright based in Queens, N.Y., also found inspiration in a troubled relationship. The result is **The Twelve Dates of Christmas**, a one-woman play she'll perform in a CATCO production opening this weekend.

"At the end of 2008, I was going through a big breakup," Hoben said during a recent phone interview. "It sort of inspired the decision to write this thing that I'd been wanting to do for a while."

Unlike Swift, however, Hoben didn't give up on the guy in question. Far from it. "The breakup resolved itself, and then I married that guy," she said, referring to fellow actor Sheffield Chastain.

Hoben said a "good portion" of her 2008 breakup made it into the play, along with other real-life experiences that happened to her or, in some cases, friends. "I just dramatized them to make them funnier or more dramatic than they actually were in my real life," she said.

Despite its title, the play actually starts out during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, when 33-year-old Mary sees her fiancé kissing another woman on TV. Not knowing his unfaithfulness has been televised, the fiancé subsequently tells Mary he's too sick to attend her family's Thanksgiving dinner.

"That launches her decision to start dating again," said Hoben, who was in her early 30s when she wrote the play. Over the course of the next year, Mary has a series of dating experiences, many of them painful, and many of them coinciding with major holidays.

How does Mary's saga resolve itself? Hoben said the audience must decide for itself whether Mary has a future with any of the men she meets, but the playwright's real-life happy ending didn't make it into the comedy.

"I wanted the play to really just be more about re-entering the dating world in one's 30s and what that's like," she said.

Hoben first performed *The Twelve Dates of Christmas* at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Va., in 2010, and has since appeared in two other productions.

"So this will be my fourth time," she said of the upcoming CATCO presentation.

The play has attracted attention, to the extent that several productions have been

staged or scheduled—with other actors playing Mary—in places as far off as Birmingham, England, and Shanghai, China. Much of the appeal apparently stems from the universality of Mary's experiences, which frequently spark an amused reaction from female viewers.

"I'll literally see a woman glance at another woman in the audience in recognition, and the whole group of women will burst into laughter and point at the woman that this has happened to," she said.

But men also can enjoy and relate to the show, Hoben was quick to add. That includes the man who helped to inspire it—her husband.

"Frequently after a performance...we're chatting with somebody (and) he'll say, 'Can you pick out which guy I was?'"