

Christmas, dating mix and clash in NC Stage Co.'s '12 Dates'

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The holiday season: It's a time to celebrate love for family and friends, begin exciting new romances (not just for the presents) and curl up beside the fireplace in the arms of someone special.

But what if you catch your fiancée kissing another woman — and, even worse, it's broadcast on live, national television during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade? For the newly single or recently betrayed, the entire holiday season can be an absolute nightmare — and no holiday tale commiserates quite like "The Twelve Dates of Christmas," a one-woman comic Christmas romp written by playwright Ginna Hoben, now running at the North Carolina Stage Co.

The hilarities, horrors and mishaps of the dating world are seen through the lens of main character Mary, played by Maria E. Buchanan.

The premise is this: After witnessing her fiancé's betrayal on national TV, Mary's life completely falls apart — and she's forced through the holidays (and her family's matchmaking antics) as a newly single woman.

"Isn't that often the case?" director Callan White asked. "Break-ups always seem to happen around the holidays. ... It can be very depressing. And that's why I love this [show] so much." Not only is it relatable, she explained, it's also empowering. Over the next year, she stumbles back into the dating world, where romance ranges from weird and creepy to absurd and comical.

Our heroine of the dating world recounts these romance-gone-wrong stories to the audience, doing voices and impressions and transforming into the men from her memories — the kind of inside scoop usually reserved for close friends and confidants over tears of laughter and glasses of wine.

"That's really such a fun part of it," White said. "She gets to play a variety of characters, which is a real challenge — in a good way — for an actor. So, even though she's on stage by herself, her talent and her ability to create all of these other people makes you really feel like they're on stage with her. You really feel like you're listening to her Aunt Kathy or her mom — or these guys that she's dating." From Christmas to New Year's Eve, St. Paddy's Day to "wedding season," Mary's dating life is one disaster after another — and, soon enough, Christmas is rolling around yet again. It seems nothing can help Mary's growing cynicism, until the charm and innocence of a child unexpectedly brings a new outlook on life and love.

"Twelve Dates" is now alternating dates with NC Stage's other holiday performance, the tried-and-true production "All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914." While the play may share a name with a made-for-TV comedy, it's certainly not the same story.

"Make no mistake, 'Twelve Dates' is not a stage version of the 'chick-flick,'" Stage Magazine wrote about the show. "Audiences of all ages and genders will enjoy getting to know this character." Taking the stage solo for 16 nights of performance, Buchanan is no newcomer to the Western North Carolina theater scene. She's previously performed at NC Stage in "Brave New World: The Musical," "Boeing Boeing," and the radio theater production of "It's a Wonderful Life," along with many shows at Flat Rock Playhouse, Parkway Playhouse, Asheville Creative Arts and the Children's Theatre of Charlotte.

"We all have things that touch us — and we all have things that have hurt us," White said. "The question is: How do we experience that and then explore that and grow from it? I think, sometimes, when you're in pain, it can be easy to be bitter — but Maria and I both just really wanted the goodness of the human being and the love to come through."

At the end of the performance, "you see a woman who's grown stronger and learned something over the course of this year," White continued. "And she has a great appreciation of how she's grown as an individual. And that's what makes it really beautiful."

See "The Twelve Dates of Christmas" at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 13, 15, 19, 21 and 23 or at 2 p.m. on Dec. 17 and 23 at NC Stage Co, 15 Stage Lane, off Walnut St. in downtown Asheville. Tickets are \$16-\$34 online at ncstage.org or by calling 828-239-0263. Find a review of the show in today's Scene section.