

Next Act's "12 Dates of Christmas" Is a Small But Sweet Taste of Holiday Spirit
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Out-of-work actors are incredibly resourceful people. Due to economic necessity, they cultivate lots of other marketable skills, working as office temps, yoga instructors, or waiters and waitresses between onstage gigs. And a few of them decide that, instead of waiting for the perfect role to come along, they will simply write a one-person show that highlights all of their individual talents ("Buyer and Cellar," "Fully Committed," etc.).

The latest example of this genre is Ginna Hoben's "The Twelve Dates of Christmas," onstage at Next Act Theater through Dec. 9. This small but mighty show chronicles one year in the life of a heartbroken actress, a small-town girl from Ohio who's trying to make it in New York City while simply surviving a horrible break-up and the twelve months of dating hell that follow.

But instead of leaving the main character, Mary, onstage alone to tell her story of wooing woes, Next Act's production wisely provides musical back-up with Milwaukee favorite Jack Forbes Wilson at the keyboard and the tight harmonies of "the Doherty Sisters" (Kelly Doherty and Marcee Doherty-Elst who are not, in fact, related).

The trio offers a little song and dance between chapters of the monologue, while helping out with props, quick costume changes, and a bit of interaction during key highs and lows for our romance-weary protagonist. Singing everything from a Thanksgiving parody of "My Favorite Things" from "The Sound of Music," to holiday carols, to a bitter chick anthem from Alanis Morissette, they provide soft, seasonal accompaniment and a few sound effects. It's just the right amount of background for this story, but it's hard not to wish for more from the super talented crew.

Most of the show belongs to Susie Duecker, who narrates Mary's misadventures. The perky brunette fills us in on a multitude of holiday horrors, from the moment over Thanksgiving when she realizes her fiancé is cheating on her (thanks to some footage on national TV) to the following Christmas, when her sour, Grinch-like attitude is melted, at least partially, by a castmate in "A Christmas Carol."

In addition to storytelling, Duecker acts out important moments, assuming an array of other characters including drunken one-night stands, a furious ex-girlfriend and a slew of relatives. Her well-meaning, but often intrusive, mother has a distinct Northern Wisconsin accent (although Mary's home is in Ohio) and her Aunt Katie is a Southern busybody, complete with oversized red glasses and a hip wiggle to emphasize her speech. Mary's sister is a kick-boxing, exercise fanatic, who makes the loss of her fiancé even worse by announcing her own engagement. Every agonizing episode is noted by hanging a symbolic prop on a Christmas tree. Duecker's high-energy delivery is captivating. She works the crowd like a pro as she circles the stage, making sure the audience is with her every step of the journey. And

her story is sure to strike a chord with anyone who remembers sorting through the "125 jackasses it takes to find one decent guy." But her character is also somewhat exhausting.

True to the author's life, Mary is an actress which in this case means she is that loud, over-dramatic friend who is validated by recounting personal disappointments as melodrama, throwing in some profanity here and there for effect. And like the gorgeous girl who complains about having too many boyfriends, sometimes it's hard to sympathize with her trials of being relentlessly courted in bars, coffee shops, subways and wedding receptions.

As the year winds down and Mary's disappointments mount, her moods become less extreme and she feels more authentic. Duecker shines as she describes Christmas in New York without a beau or her nagging family, or any warm heart she was looking for. Mary insists several times in the play that her reality is a far cry from TV or the movies, and thankfully the script doesn't offer a Hollywood ending for the sake of closure. Instead there is a feeling of cautious optimism —maybe even hope – which is a good fit for holiday fare.

And thanks to "Twelve Dates," you'll even gain a new appreciation for the magic that can occur backstage at "A Christmas Carol."