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Review: A 1-woman play with something for all of us

Thanksgiving was a disaster for Mary. While watching Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on TV, she caught a glimpse of her fiancé making out with an "over-cosmeticized, over-bleached, over-the-counter-dimestore-ho-bag" colleague named Melissa.

Clearly, the emotional territory that playwright Ginna Hoben takes us through in "The 12 Dates of Christmas" verges on the treacherous. But as that snippet of her script suggests, Hoben finds a way to extract plenty of humor, as well.

The one-person show, being performed in New Edgecliff Theatre's production by Annie Kalahurka, opened Wednesday at the Know Theatre and will continue through Dec. 21. Based on Lewis McGruder's original direction, this restaging is by New Edgecliff's producing artistic director Jim Stump.

When we meet Mary, a year has passed since her Thanksgiving from hell. And as the title suggests, she has eased back into the world of dating. It hasn't been an easy journey. As she recounts the adventures of the past year, it's evident that she has experienced both desperation and bliss.

One date is a wonderful guy, but it's too soon after her breakup. She wants to put him on layaway. Another is an unabashed one-night stand. Another is a control freak, while others just fade painlessly into the backdrop of her life.

But, wonder of wonders, she has survived.

In a society where all too often a woman's happiness is measured by her ability to find the perfect man, playwright Hoben declines to wrap up Mary's story with a neat little bow. We don't know where or how Mary will end up. And while she may not be satisfying her match-making Aunt Kathy's dreams, she is finding her own way. This may look like a play about Mary and her dates. But underneath it all, this is a play about Mary and no one else.

She's smart and witty. She doesn't stick up for herself nearly as often as she should. She doesn't want to believe in the idea of romance, but she does. She's willing to overlook a date's flaws even when alarm bells are going off in her head. She's conflicted about her family back home in Ohio. (She's an actress in New York.) She loves them, but they make her crazy.

Does any of this sound familiar? Of course it does. And that's what makes this play so endearing. Male or female, most of us see bits and pieces of our own lives in Hoben's wonderful, self-indulgent reverie.

That brings us to Kalahurka, the actor who has to carry this entire thing from beginning to end. There's a Christmas tree on stage. And a couple of pieces of

furniture that she keeps moving around. But this is all Kalahurka. She's on her own out there.

Let's just say that Hoben is blessed to have Kalahurka as her alter ego. Kalahurka is a gifted actress and physical comic. She is all over the place, both physically and emotionally. Her mood is up. Her mood is down. Heck, in the countdown to the drop of the New Year's Eve ball, she goes through 10 mental flip-flops in 30 seconds. It's hilarious.

Not only does Kalahurka have to create a credible Mary, but since she's the only one on the stage, she has to assume the identity of every one of the two dozen or so characters she introduces us to. There are the 12 guys she dates. And the nosy aunt. And her goodie-goodie sister. And her suck-up brother-in-law. And a boyfriend's glamorous ex. And a little boy who plays Tiny Tim and who, incidentally, brings her some of her greatest joys of the year.

It's an amazing achievement. In fact, if there is one complaint about Kalahurka's performance it's that, on opening night, she worked it all much harder than she needed to. Nerves, perhaps. Kalahurka is a gifted and engaging performer. She doesn't have to convince an audience to go along with her. Mind you, the character is a bit of a drama queen. She's intended to be, in fact.

"I hate it when they call me 'dramatic,'" says an indignant Mary. "I'm an actor. What's the alternative? Dead?"

Point made. But those moments where Kalahurka lets up a bit, where she relaxes and changes the pace of the play slightly are the show's most effective. A one-person show, by its very nature, exists in that curious world between theater and stand-up comedy. Kalahurka has the actorly chops to do it all.