

Theater Review: The Twelve Dates of Christmas at NC Stage Co.
Dec. 16, 2018 Michael Poandl, [Asheville Movies](#), [Asheville Stages](#)

Ah, the dilemma of the Holiday Theatergoer: During the season of giving, who can't be forgiven for wanting a bit of Christmas cheer from the stage? But then again, who among us has not gotten just a teensy bit tired of the same old pageants, carols, and Tiny Tims with dubious Cockney accents?

Luckily, North Carolina Stage Company and director Callan White have a bit of spice ready to tip into our collective theatrical nogs this December. Ginna Hoben's one-woman show *The Twelve Dates of Christmas*, playing through Dec. 30, is a delicious mixture of bitterness and cheer, cynicism and hope, cocoa and whiskey. With a fabulous design and a pitch-perfect performance by Maria Buchanan, *Twelve Dates* is that holiday show we've all been waiting for: earnest and hopeful, with enough edge to have even the most dedicated holiday-philes rolling in the aisles.

Mary, the main character of *Twelve Dates*, has a problem. She loves the holidays and she loves her fiancé. But after seeing her beloved making out with another woman at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade — on camera, for the whole nation to see — her faith in true love and the Christmas spirit is severely shaken. Over the next 12 months, she must navigate her overbearing family, her life as a struggling actor in New York, and a dozen less than desirable dates. Hilarity ensues — but also a surprisingly heartfelt meditation on what it means to be an adult during a holiday season most of us fell in love with as children.

Director White strings *Twelve Dates* together with a few clever gimmicks — Christmas tree ornaments are hung for each lousy would-be boyfriend, for example — but being a one-person show, it is really up to actress Maria Buchanan whether the play thrives or not. And Buchanan delivers. As Mary, she's a sort of neurotic and less glamorous Carrie Bradshaw. Her belief in humanity is never quite extinguished, although circumstances continually conspire to do so.

Buchanan is also required throughout the course of the show's 90 minutes to play a slew of other characters — various boyfriends ranging from goofy to creepy; her mother; an imperial doctor “with legs longer than my body”; and, yes, a 5-year-old Tiny Tim — and she is convincing as all of them. Buchanan makes strong, deliberate choices and commands attention for the length of the show — no easy task.

Complementing Buchanan's stellar performance is a fantastic overall design. Julie K. Ross presents a minimalist but brightly colored staging that allows for a wide range of settings. Transparent cubes filled with a smattering of Christmas lights are festive and versatile. The lighting design, by Alice Trent, utilizes the capacity of color-changing LED Christmas lights to evoke a wide range of atmospheres, from the red and greens of Christmas Day to cool blues for January and burnt oranges for autumn in New York.

Twelve Dates features an unusually robust sound design by Charlie Flynn-McIver. Dozens of cues are executed with precise timing by stage manager Lindsey A. Moss and the NC Stage Co. team. It might not be immediately noticeable to most audience members, but the variety of sound effects and musical clips really do add a whole additional layer of texture to the show. Overall, the show is polished and bright, a critical element of a holiday show that can't count on a saccharine message to bring the cheer.

The mixture of crowded shopping malls, frantic traffic, and family drama that so often accompanies this time of year means we could all use a good laugh. *The Twelve Dates of Christmas* tells us that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously this season. On the other hand, it's a reminder that the holidays really are a time to take stock, express gratitude, and maybe even find true love. By the end of *Twelve Dates*, even the most cynical among us may be heard yelling “God bless us, everyone!”