

The Twelve Dates of Christmas - Old Joint Stock Theatre, Birmingham

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Writer: Ginna Hoben **Director:** Richard Poynton

Reviewer: Selwyn Knight **The Public Reviews Rating:** 4 1/5 out of 5 stars

Feisty New York actor Mary has it all: a loving family with whom she enjoys traditional get-togethers at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and a fiancé, who she “knows better than anyone else”. She always visits her family in Ohio at Thanksgiving and watches Macy’s parade on TV there, safe from the bustle of New York’s sidewalks. This year, she’s newly engaged but her fiancé can’t come and be shown off because of some “bad chicken”. While her energetic sister leads the rest of the family on an invigorating walk, Mary settles to watch the parade alone, apart from her lovely diamond engagement ring. Her world falls apart when, by chance, the camera picks out her fiancé making out with a co-worker. She immediately dumps him, drops her ring into a charity box, and sets out on a year of aloneness.

Writer and actress Ginna Hoben says that the play grew out of a couple of periods in her life when she was single and that some of the incidents are based in her experiences. Certainly, Mary’s narrative, as she looks back on her life over the next year or so, including twelve dates of varying degrees of awfulness, has the ring of truth to it. Sarah Gain, as Mary, demonstrates excellent story-telling skills (as she addresses the audience directly for much of the time) one moment, angry, the next flirty, quirky, or close to tears, but always with an underscoring of fragility and expectation. Her accents never slip and she is believably New Yorker Mary, endlessly conflicted. But she also seamlessly slips into all the supporting characters along the way, including a string of dates with one-night stands, serial monogamist doctors, control freaks... the list goes on. Particularly lovely are the scenes in which Mary, playing the Ghost of Christmas Past in a production of *A Christmas Carol*, becomes a surrogate carer for Tiny Tim, a gorgeous five-year-old. The audience couldn’t help but let out a heartfelt, “aaahhh!” when Tim, looking up into Mary’s face with an unmistakable glow in his own, invited her home to play at Christmas. However, this is not simply a string of more-or-less unsuccessful dates that we’re treated to. We also meet her Mom, sister and good-hearted, if

annoyingly manipulative, southern Aunt Cathy. Mary's long-distance relationship with her family comes under increasing strain, and she begins to really understand aloneness as she closes herself off from them at holiday times.

So is there any light at the end of Mary's tunnel? Hoben wisely does not make this explicit, but tonight's audience had clearly made their minds up!

Gain carries the entire ninety minute show through the force of Mary's personality. Each anecdote is nicely closed as she decorates her tree. Richard Poynton's direction ensures the story flows and never drags with good use made of the minimalist set and lighting. And what a gem the venue is! Set in a room above a bustling pub, the intimate, Fringe-like theatre at The Old Joint Stock really suits this play: we genuinely feel as if we have been invited into Mary's home to be a part of her life. The only minor criticism I have is that the recorded Christmas music that punctuates the piece is rather intrusive at the beginning when it lacks subtlety. As the play moves on and matures, so the music becomes more complementary to the changing moods.

Overall, a hugely enjoyable evening. Not a saccharin night out by any means, but nevertheless a feel-good play that certainly set me up for the festive season.