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THEATERWEEK

INTERVIEW BY ANTHONY CHASE



Michele Ragusa in Theresa Rebeck's *Bad Dates*, at Studio Arena.

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Bad Dates

Ok ladies and gentlemen of the theater going public, yes, I did see *Bad Dates*. Yes, I enjoyed it. Yes, I agree that Michele Ragusa is charismatic and engaging and talented. Yes, I knew that I would not be seeing *Oedipus Rex* before I arrived at the theater.

Bad Dates, by Theresa Rebeck, is just about exactly what I expected. A one-woman show about Haley Walker, a Texan transplanted to New York City where she has lived through marriage, motherhood, divorce, and a colorful career in the restaurant business. Now Haley is venturing back out into the dating game, and in a series of monologues separated by black-outs, she shares the preparation for and the post-mortem after each night out.

Bad Dates originally played at Playwrights Horizons in New York City in 2003, where Julie White's performance as Haley first attracted the attention that culminated, last week, in star-making reviews for her current show, Douglas Carter Bean's *Little Dog Laughed*; "an irresistible adrenaline rush of a performance," says Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* (1/10/06). The show is a worthy vehicle for attracting attention to an actress. So what if the material is slim? Even on its first outing, critic Bruce Weber of the *Times* observed that "No one will accuse Theresa Rebeck of overreaching in her new one-character play, *Bad Dates*, ... it's a show with limited ambition but a cozy kind of familiarity."

Conceding that just about everything that can be said about dating disasters has already appeared "in movies, in best-selling books, in television sitcoms, in women's magazines or by legions of stand-up comedians," and that an evening of theater should be "more edifying than 'Late Night With Conan O'Brian,'" Weber allowed that, to her credit Ms. Rebeck proves that she understands this, implicitly acknowledging the thinness of her conceit by weaving the stories of Haley's ill-fated forays in dating into an entirely different story. And so our heroine sets out to negotiate a tale of Romanian gangsters, tax evasion, and a Buddhist lawyer she meets at a soggy party.

Now, even that might not sound remarkably enticing, but the trick works when the actress playing Haley is tremendously appealing. Michele Ragusa certainly is.

Bad Dates is an easy confection of a play, providing Studio Arena with an opportunity to showcase an accomplished hometown actress. Granted, when I first commented that Ms. Ragusa had been wasted as a second banana in Studio's production of *Noises Off!* and that they should feature her more prominently in another play, my fantasy was something along the lines of the great roles of our most legendary hometown actress, Katharine Cornell, say *The Constant Wife*, or *Doctor's Dilemma*. But, *Bad Dates* is making the rounds of the regional theaters and a monologue is more economical than the large cast productions of Maugham or Shaw. So *Bad Dates* it is. I suspect that reported disgruntlement with *Bad Dates* among some is a combination of impatience with Studio Arena's seeming inability to light an inspired artistic fire under itself, and the girlie factor — some reviewers just don't "get" the *Steel Magnolias* of this world.

So for those who enjoy a nice night of dish and a shaggy dog tale, Michele Ragusa brings a perfect mix of urbane savvy and girlish naïveté to Haley. Her alternate projections of motherliness, sexiness, confidence, and helplessness make her just about irresistible. She is entirely delightful, and while I would love to see her at Studio Arena Theatre again in a more substantial vehicle, I found her to be winningly appealing in *Bad Dates*. Scott Schwartz's direction guides the character along a clear and amusing path, and sets by Anulfo Maldonado keep the proceedings light.

Gilligan's Island

The point of the evening is entirely summed up when the lights first come up on the cast of *Gilligan's Island: the Musical*, and audience lets out a delighted laugh of recognition. This is a nostalgia show. Actually once we've seen the characters, there's not much left to do but wallow in the naïve comedy in the style of 1960s sitcoms.

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