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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'Brien,'" 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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Gilligan's Island: the Musical is intentionally awful. The musical recreates the characteristic elements of the original show, including the infectiously catchy theme song with its litany of the characters and its annoying mispronunciation of "Robinson Crusoe." The talented O'Connell & Company cast approximates the tone and substance of the original quite accurately as well: Joseph Demerly as Gilligan; Tom Doyle as the Skipper too; Michael Tosha and Mary Moebius as the Millionaire and his Wife; Stephanie Bax as the Movie Star; Guy Tomassi and Susana Breese as the Professor and Mary Ann (or as "the rest," depending upon which season we're talking about). And that's all you need to know.

The score runs the gamut from forgettable to ridiculously grandiose, and mimics other shows—for the ballad "I Should Have Said," think "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Mis*, and so forth. The comedy would be more pointed with a full orchestration and with stronger voices, but the deliberate quality of amateurism employed here works well enough.

Comedy challenges the critic by obscuring any socially redeeming reason for its existence. With *Gilligan's Island: the Musical*, or with any pure nostalgia piece, we are confronted with our own aging and the realization that we are not the same people now that we were when the object of our nostalgia was first produced. Typically, nostalgia pieces suggest that the world is less innocent or somehow less wonderful now than it used to be. What has actually changed is that as we get older, we ourselves are less innocent than we used to be. *Gilligan's Island: the Musical*, for instance, focuses on a flimsy plot in which aliens from another planet prepare to destroy the earth because human beings have made the world a dangerous place and do not have the capacity to get along. The idea that the world we live in today is not as innocent as the world of 1964 is undercut by the fact that a world that had already seen Hitler, Hiroshima, Joseph McCarthy, and the Kennedy Assassination was not very innocent to begin with. The Civil Rights Movement that was raging in 1964 may have been far removed from the lives of the seven castaways, but not from those of television viewers.

And so, in *Gilligan's Island: the Musical*, we sit right back and we hear an escapist tale, just as some of us did 40 years ago. It is a harmless diversion.

Artie Award winner Pamela Rose Mangus makes a hilariously bad career choice in taking the part of the Alien (she may never work again). Todd Warfield has directed with appropriate energy and a pace that seems to say, "Let's not prolong this!" Liz Houlihan's set is especially handsome.

Let's let it go at that, shall we?
 ●●●●●●●●

Good

Serious drama can be a critical free space. Offered far less often than frivolous comedy, the gravity of its scope provides self-justification. A film like *Brokeback Mountain*, for instance, a lightweight and predictable Hollywood melodrama, albeit gloriously filmed, provides an ennobling experience to audiences at many levels—straight audiences feel insightful; gay audiences feel reinforced, and so forth. To be serious in tone is often to be taken seriously.

In the theater, where audiences, by virtue

of being smaller, are more discerning, we tend to strive for a higher standard; sometimes to an unreasonable degree. Tennessee Williams' work was routinely dismissed by the critical elite during his lifetime. But a related opposite impulse is also common—the tendency to praise serious work for being serious, despite flaws. Even lackluster Shakespeare is greeted with gratitude, simply because it is Shakespeare.

It can be difficult to calibrate, to strike the right critical balance in assessing productions of serious work.

The current Buffalo production of C.P. Taylor's complex and lusciously theatrical play, *Good*, provides such a challenge. Expansive and multifaceted in scope, *Good* follows the journey of Halder, an academic in Germany of the 1930s who is able to justify a life of expedience and total self-indulgence, including the abandonment of an inconvenient wife and his ailing mother, leaving behind his children, the seduction of one of his students, the abandonment of his best friend to the Nazis, and the designing of the death chambers at Auschwitz. Evading any suggestion that he is in any way accountable for his decisions, Halder advances higher and higher, never feeling more than the vague twinge of guilt, confident in his belief that his own "good"ness is an immutable reality.

There is no argument that Taylor's script is wonderful. Halder's descent into the Nazi movement is all the more horrible because its "unwitting" nature is deliberate. Halder only sees what is convenient for himself.

The production at the Andrews, produced by the Irish Classical Theatre in collaboration with Jewish Repertory Theatre, under the direction of Greg Natale, is faithful to Taylor's script and provides some marvelous individual elements. It is smartly cast, with Paul Todaro as Halder; Lisa Vitrano as his unloved wife; Saul Elkin as his best friend; Arlene Clement as his mother; and Hallie Clarke as his Eva Braun-esque student fancy-woman-come-wife. There are brilliant flourishes in the minor roles, Christian Brandjes as a fellow SS officer; Kelly Ferguson in a variety of small roles, including a credible Marlene Dietrich impersonation. There is also the luxurious musical addition of Don Jenczka and Mary Ramsey on viola and violin.

What there is not, is any sense of urgency or building toward a climax. The production plods along at its even pace, everything good, but not interesting as a whole. Even a fantasy sequence including the entrance of Buffalo's most beloved character actor Saul Elkin, leading a Jewish Men's Choir in full song does not raise the production above its even level.

Individual moments provide isolated excitement: Arlene Clement's ravings as the mother; Saul Elkin's articulate arguments which rise to panicked pleading for his life; Lisa Vitrano's unhinged efforts to keep her marriage together. But these moments stand alone as if each were its own individual play, disconnected from the others. One moment layers over another, while the overall arch of the evening lies in the submerged fragments of a wonderful play. Good? Yes. Worthwhile? Indeed. Theatrically thrilling? Alas not. av



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