

Palo Alto Online Palo Alto Weekly: It's all about the shoes (April 8, 2011)

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It's all about the shoes

'Bad Dates' is a funny but insubstantial look at dating, footwear and identity

by Jeanie K. Smith

The Dragon Theatre in downtown Palo Alto makes a habit of tackling lesser-known contemporary plays alongside classics, so it's no surprise to find Theresa Rebeck's play "Bad Dates" in its season.

Rebeck is an American playwright whose later works, "The Understudy," "Omnium Gatherum" and "Mauritius," are frequently seen on the regional-theater circuit, although you might have heard more about the TV shows she's written for, including "L.A. Law," "NYPD Blue" and "Law and Order: Criminal Intent."

Rebeck's earned her place in the pantheon of playwriting, and has turned her hand to novels ("Three Girls and Their Brother") and nonfiction ("Free Fire Zone") as well. "Bad Dates," originally appearing at Playwrights Horizon in New York in 2003, chronicles the return to dating for a divorced mom, Haley Walker (Laura Jane Bailey), a transplanted Texan in the Big Apple.

Haley has 600 pairs of shoes and a teenage daughter. Soon after she lands a good waitress job, her Romanian boss is arrested and she's put in charge of the restaurant, which turns into a huge hit with a rave review in the New York Times. Successful and more confident, Haley turns her attention to finding a good man to have good times with, which any single professional woman knows is easier said than done, even in a large dating pool.

Each scene is a monologue either preparing for or dissecting a dating experience, until her former boss gets out of jail and the Romanian mob shows up — well, it's all complicated, but the serious bits are balanced by humor and Haley's hopeful determination.

It's definitely a star vehicle, the kind of one-woman show that actresses love to sink their teeth into, and can showcase talent in a major way. Bailey is an excellent actress who works hard to deliver an evening's entertainment. She excels at comedy, conveying self-deprecating ironies with speed and intelligence, reminiscent of Lucille Ball or Meg Ryan. She also touches our hearts with a sincere moment of rejection, a

familiar and earnest portrayal of hitting an unexpected bottom. Bailey envelops the audience in a warm, friendly demeanor and invites us to share Haley's journey.

Regrettably, the material is thin and doesn't live up to its hype. Rebeck doesn't trust her own story, padding it with trivial pursuits that add playing time but little substance. She seems to know that so much has already been said about modern dating experience, and wants to surprise us with different subject matter altogether. Instead of hearing tale after tale of dating failures, we hear lengthy musings about the relative value of shoes or achieving the right look to avoid sluttiness. We're inside Haley's head, getting a protracted look into her psyche, but there's apparently not much there.

There's also a lot of repetition that slows the script down, so that when action finally arrives it feels anticlimactic; and then the play turns out to be about something else entirely. That something, having to do with identity and self-esteem, certainly merits examination, but it comes with such plot contrivance as to nearly be lost.

Many patrons in the audience enjoyed the show a great deal, and it is indeed laced with humor and some delightful moments. It might be just the thing for a light-hearted diversion, provided you don't expect something deep.

What: "Bad Dates," by Theresa Rebeck, presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Through April 17, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets are \$16 to \$30.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.