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NextStop's The 12 Dates of Christmas, full of holiday cheers

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The Holidays just aren't for everyone. The shopping, the travel, the crowds, the expectations...it can be a little overwhelming. Catching a glimpse of your fiancé locking lips with a stranger at the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade certainly doesn't exactly rouse the Christmas spirit, either.

This unfortunate event is exactly what happened to heroine and narrator Mary (Kari Ginsburg) in NextStop Theater Company's The 12 Dates of Christmas.

Rest assured I'm not ruining anything, as Mary dishes on the traumatic end to her relationship in the opening few minutes of the show. This is only the beginning. Heartbroken and despondent from the implosion of her engagement, Mary carries on with life as a 30-something actress and barista in New York City, picking up the pieces where she can.

As part of this exercise (and in keeping with the play's title), Mary engages in a series of romantic escapades over the course of the next year. Twelve, to be exact.

The outcome of her romantic encounters isn't really what matters here. Some work, at least for a little while, and some don't. Some are tragically hilarious, some just tragic. Some are sweet, and some are just good for an evening. For anyone that's been on the dating scene for any amount of time, it's kind of how these things go.

What's important here is that all of Mary's adventures are funny as hell. Kari Ginsburg quickly endears herself to the audience as Mary. Ginsburg is likeable and sympathetic even as she dishes out witty and sarcastic barbs for everything from Christmas to dating to men in general. Mary is the kind of storyteller you want around to liven up a dinner party, and Ginsburg uses the role to exhibit some serious range. To the audience's delight, Ginsburg shifts gears seamlessly between humor and despondence while showcasing an impressive ability to keep the energy up even as she bounds around the stage, performs some light calisthenics and carries on without a break for roughly 90 minutes.

Mary isn't alone throughout her adventures. Her mother, her Aunt Kathy, a "beautiful mysterious woman" and others are on hand to provide support, encouragement, and the phone numbers of a few good men for Mary. Ginsburg plays them all, deftly switching between her characters' ticks, mannerisms and accents, and maintaining the show's momentum throughout.

Not every moment is pitch perfect, of course. For one, it's never explained why Mary's mother has a thick Midwestern accent while Aunt Kathy (presumably mom's sister) has a twangy Southern drawl, but we can chalk that up to creative license. Additionally, some lines early on are delivered a little hastily, giving an air of

hysteria to the opening scenes. In the end, however, both Ginsburg and director Abigail Isaac prove that they know how to build a crescendo and create a quiet moment, masterfully reining in the performance where it counts.

What's more concerning is a frustrating subtext underpinning the play. Mary is, by all appearances, a smart and relatively successful woman. In the year throughout which *12 Dates of Christmas* takes place Mary starts a new job, is offered a series of acting roles and spends a good deal of time with what appear to be close friends and family who love her. The fact that she disregards the entire year as a failure simply because she couldn't lock down a man is a little troubling.

But, such is the nature of heartbreak, and the script does show some impressive restraint. Mary's trials and tribulations could have been fuel for the rantings of an anti-Christmas curmudgeon, but playwright Ginna Hoben and Kari Ginsburg offer a production that is full of mirth. Mary feels sorry for herself in the worst way, but who can blame her? The audience is treated to self-pity that is jolly and playful, rather than a foot-stomping temper-tantrum.

Equally refreshing is Hoben's decision to eschew the neat little bow that wraps so many a romantic-comedy under the proverbial tree. What remains is a play that is thoughtful and reflective, if sweet enough to jerk a tear or two. NextStop's *The 12 Dates of Christmas* is worth more than a look – it's worth a place as a Christmas tradition. Like *A Christmas Carol* and its ilk, this is one I would brave the snowy streets again to see next December.

Sure, *The 12 Dates of Christmas* isn't likely to leave anyone nostalgic for the dating scene, but it may just instill a little holiday spirit in those who need it most.