

from TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Do You Feel Anger?



Photo by Jeff Lorch

Circle X

When a professional empathy coach is hired by a debt collection office to help train their employees in how to compassionately handle transactions without calling customers bitches and to stop beating up their emotionally fragile female coworker in the facility's communal kitchen, little does she know what she's gotten herself into.

Despite ignoring her own mess of a family dynamic, Sofia (Paula Rebelo) is confident she has the emotional fortitude to change the thinking and the behavior of the company's male telephone debt collectors despite the fact that one of the first questions she's asked is to explain what exactly the word empathy means.

"Empathy?" asks Jon (Casey Smith), the genuinely classless office manager who wishes Sofia would sign off on the experiment and go home, "Isn't that a type of bird?"

A biting, delightfully off-kilter and refreshingly bizarre tale about the abuse and trauma of women in the workplace doesn't seem as though it would be all that funny, I know. Well, ducks, unstoppably irreverent playwright Mara Nelson-Greenberg instantly proves it's more than possible with her knockout new #MeToo vs. Cancel Culture comedy/tragedy romp *Do You Feel Anger?*, which feels like a welcome hybrid between the contemporary absurdist brilliance of John Guare and Charles Mee, with a little Nicky Silver thrown in for good measure.

First premiering at Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays in 2018, Chicago director Halena Kays was in attendance and suitably mindboggled. "My mouth was wide open most of the play," Kays admits. "Nelson-Greenberg has tilted our world just askew enough that we recognize it but also see it in a whole new way."

What could be a better match for *Anger's* west coast premiere than to be presented by the bravely off-center folks at Circle X, since 1996 one of the most prolific and convention-defying theatre companies in our culturally deprived reclaimed desert climes, an eclectic troupe of like-minded individuals stalwartly dedicated to producing unique and provocative theatrical experiences against all odds.

You know, odds such as making enough money to keep from disappearing as so many other well-meaning theatrical ensembles have in the past few years.

After a three-year hiatus from LA's intimate theatre scene, Circle X has found a fine home at the Atwater Village Theatre complex, itself to be commended for their dedication to be a generous and affable place for our city's many often struggling nomadic theatre companies to work and thrive.

Thanks to what could possibly be attributed to some wildly serendipitous nepotism, both *Do You Feel Anger?* and the once-boggled Kays have landed in LA and the result is yet another success for Circle X. Kays' direction is sharply explosive and continuously in-your-face, perfect for delivering Nelson-Greenberg's stinging indictment of our fuckedup societal mores peeking out just below the outrageous humor.

The production could not be more impressively mounted, particularly with the excellent design team joined together to create their subtle magic built around Francois-Pierre Couture's sufficiently drab yet whimsical set that proves to possess a few surprises of its own.

Kays' has snagged the quintessential cast, truly a posterchild for ensemble performance. Napoleon Tavale and Rich Liccardo are delightfully creepy as the office's resident misogynistic phone collectors, Jordan prone to recite ludicrous poetry without warning ("A cow, a man, a boy, a light! A song, a rock, a fish, a star!") and his counterpart introducing himself by saying, "I'm Howie and I have a really bad temper." Neither of the guys understand what they're doing there enduring Sofia's lessons or comprehend what all the lawsuits against the company are about. I mean, what's wrong with a a guy asking for a blowjob without reciprocation if that's what he really, really likes? At least they're being honest and putting their feelings out there, right?

Rebelo does a commendable job assuming the sraightman role, playng Abbott to a whole stageful of Costellos, that is until the office dynamics take a turn for the worse and suddenly her character is thrust into a whole new dimension. This surely is the play's most difficult transition to ace and Rebelo accomplishes it seamlessly.

Appearing occasionally alone on a side stage as Sofia's shattered mother leaving increasingly defeated phone messages for her daughter, begging her to respond as she and her bigamist father go through a nasty divorce, Rose Portillo is heartbreaking and expertly able to deal with playing *Anger's* most grounded character without the feeling of being isolated from the rest of the cast or possibly even appearing in another play altogether in less capable hands.

Still, it's Tasha Ames as neurotic battered coworker Eva and the aforementioned Mr. Smith as the company manager Jon who guide the storyline and make both the nuttiness and the underlying pathos of Nelson-Greenberg's amazingly hilarious—and ultimately profound—play work.

Ames begins the first scene greeting her potential savior Sofia on such a faux-amphetamine high and delivering such a wonderfully freakish rant that it fuels the entire play, coming on as though Jennifer Coolidge has been cast in the title role in a remake of *Annie Hall* (and having once seen Coolidge play a Gucci-clad Laura in a Groundling's spoof of *The Glass Menagerie*, this vision is actually not too farfetched).

Smith also immediately takes no prisoners, dispatching each of his goofy lines directly out front with brightly shining toothpaste commercial glee even though he is the only actor onstage who employs this daring *commedia dell'arte*-inspired device. Better yet: he makes it work beautifully.

There's also a lovely unexpected eleventh-hour cameo from Charlotte Gulezian as Janie, a physically and emotionally battered coworker so destroyed by her chauvinistic cohorts that she has basically moved into a bathroom stall while her sweater remains draped over the back of a chair in Couture's austere conference room set and her coffee mug becomes more and more overrun with growing mold as the play unfolds (with kudos due to "Specialty Prop Designer" Richard Maher, I suspect).

And speaking of cameos, the other Chuck Mee-ian surprise comes when a wheelchair-bound character called The Old Man (well, his age is said to be 130, it seems) suddenly enters with the intent of blowing up the office—except that he grabbed a couple of cans of dog food instead of explosives.

In true Circle X style, the scene-stealing role is being played each week by a different actor, with the perpetually deadpanned Bob Clendenin hilariously kicking off opening weekend, to be followed during the run by veteran LA theatre curmudgeons William Salyers, John Getz, Jan Munroe, Tony Amendola, and Silas Weir Mitchell.

"Comedians and comic writers have become the poets and philosophers of our society," director Halena Kays believes and that perspective is brilliantly advocated in this sparking yet categorically terrifying production.

For all the spectacular components that came together to bring *Do You Feel Anger?* to the west, nothing about this production is more impressive than the introduction to a true wunderkind playwright ready to energize a whole new generation of playgoers.

"It's a small, insular community here," Eva tells Sofia on their first meet and greet. "Everyone is outgoing and mean and it's just a really fantastic, really scary work environment." It seems something akin to how I feel about the quality of our lives in general these days, universally speaking, way beyond the claustrophobic walls of Mara Nelson-Greenberg's inanimate Everyman of an office conference room.

THROUGH FEB. 25: Circle X at Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA.
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