

CURRENT REVIEWS

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Dido of Idaho

Atwater Village Theatre

Life has been something of a slog for poor Nora, an adjunct music history professor at the University of Idaho stuck in a longterm dead-end relationship with her colleague Michael, an English professor and wannabe poet who it soon becomes apparent is playing her bigtime.

In Abby Rosebrock's devilishly dark, enticingly warped, and often exhilarating new play *Dido of Idaho*, now in its LA debut from the always daring Echo Theater Company, Nora (the spectacular Alana Dietze) is doing a bit of scheming of her own.

As improbable as it may seem that Michael (Joby Earle) would be careless enough to leave his dysfunctional and drunk mistress alone in the home he shares with his former Miss Greater Boise runner-up wife Crystal (Nicole DuPort) while Nora tries to find her discarded panties after their scheduled weekly toss in the hay, his disastrously out of character decision leads to something that could only be called life altering for our classic modernday heroine.

This opening scene predictably begins in bed where the needy and already disillusioned musicologist sings along to one of her favorite arias from English composer Henry Purcell 1688 baroque opera *Dido and Aeneas*—you know, the one based on Virgil's *Aeneid* where the otherwise valiant Queen of Carthage stabs herself to death in front of her devoted followers after being abandoned by her two-timing Trojan lover.

Get it? "Don't let me end up like Dido," Nora pleads to her departing lover, a line that almost doesn't need to be included.

It takes about a minute to see where Rosebrock is going here although, even though the play's audience members seated in-the-round circling Amanda Knehans' resourcefully austere set are clearly meant to be substitutes for Dido's ardent worshippers, don't expect an onstage funeral pyre at the end to represent the legendary death of Dido. Rosebrock is far too clever to go there.

It's hardly a surprise to anyone in attendance, I suspect, that when Nora passes out after drinking the couple's booze, using Crystal's nail polish, and rubbing the bed's toss pillow on her as yet unwashed private parts, the unsuspecting Crystal comes home and starts to threaten her nearly somnambulant intruder with some handy kitchen utensil. Our Dido

manages quickly to wake/sober up and convince her clueless rival that she works with Michael and he let her rest there after some sort of psychotic break that afternoon in the school's library.

Crystal is anything but sympathetic until Nora improvises that she was afraid to go home because her abusive boyfriend might just knock her around again. Soon Crystal is baking her unexpected houseguest chocolate chip cookies—which she really does, making the theatre smell like grandma's kitchen—and just like *that*, Michael's favorite pair of significant others are on their way to becoming unlikely fast friends.

The maternal Crystal declares herself to be Nora's self-proclaimed life coach, reading her Google content about a new Danish technique to send loneliness and personal maladjustment packing called "Snuggle Alone" and advising her on how to get her mess of a life together.

Along the way, Nora also learns a lot about Michael, someone Crystal admits "is a total shit 43% of the time" who isn't separated from his wife as he said he was—in fact, he's about to become a father for the first time, a little factoid not even he knows about yet.

Of course, their rapidly accelerating kinship changes abruptly when Crystal tries to access something on Nora's iPad and discovers the true nature of Michael's relationship with her new bestie. Within seconds, she is on the attack and... well... here emerges the playwright's truly unique ability to completely upend her audience's comfort zone and send those observing Dido's updated journey into a near-Cronenberg state of shock.

Methinks Rosebrock is definitely a playwright to watch. Her quirky revelation-a-minute plot and nonstop clever dialogue chockful of double entendres and thrown-away one-liners is skillfully mixed with a survivor's instinct that eviscerates the selfish and disenfranchising society contemporary millennials and others must navigate in an effort to find love.

Director Abigail Deser proves to be the quintessential person to interpret the dramatist's signature voice, smoothly guiding her nearly perfect cast on the Knehans' intimate set, with the viewers surrounding the actors placed so close that at one point an audience member had to uncross his legs as Nora began to hump Michael's lap close enough for the scene to almost become an unexpected *ménage a trois*.

Deser's cast is totally onboard for the rough and often disquieting intermissionless ride, led by the completely mesmerizing Dietze, who as Nora delivers a multifaceted knockout performance in a role that, without her gifts, could deflate the entire production.

Nora drives nearly every scene and the actor playing her must be at once heroic, slatternly, and yet manage to effectively play someone completely absorbed by self-loathing without making us wish she'd just stop whining and shut the fuck up, something a lesser actor could

easily mangle.

DuPort is both hilarious and scary as Crystal, a role originally played by the playwright herself, a latterday Stepford wife who keeps her Miss Greater Boise runner-up crown on a well-lit suspended shelf and spouts singsong-y aphorisms on life reminiscent of Jack Handey's *Deep Thoughts*.

Julie Dretzin is memorable as Nora's estranged and, in her daughter's mind, long absent mother, whose fundamental conservative religious rhetoric is in conflict with her blossoming romance with her roommate Ethel, the play's most levelheaded character beautifully played with a palpable wisdom and all-knowing patience by Elissa Middleton.

Earle as Michael, part snake and part poet, is the production's only miscalculation in an otherwise faultless ensemble. Even considering he's playing someone intensely narcissistic, if perhaps he modified his one-man show watch-me-act delivery and started to really listen to his scene partner, more believable fireworks might spark between he and Dietze.

With all the twists and turns and jolts (and to be honest, improbabilities) that permeate the most fascinating *Dido of Idaho*, the final reverse bombshell is that our title character might not be quite as doomed as her namesake ancient queen might have been. Whenever someone can find even the most minimal sense of hope in living life and finding true love in the 21st century, the smallest thing can be potentially monumental.

As Michael leaves, pointing to his most recent unpublished manuscript he wants Nora to peruse, he asks her to keep her "eye out for stereotypes of irrational women." See? Abby Rosebrock is a playwright who can even poke fun at herself.

THROUGH AUG. 26: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 747.350.8066 or EchoTheaterComapny.com
