

# CALENDAR

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**THEATER REVIEW**

## Echo reaches for the divine

In Chiara Atik's 'Poor Clare,' a 13th century saint is more like a relatable millennial.

**CHARLES McNULTY**  
THEATER CRITIC

The saint's play, also called the miracle play, was a popular form of religious drama in the European Middle Ages. The historical record is spotty, though we know that the genre dramatized the legends of saints and martyrs, often made room for supernatural occurrences and sometimes pandered to antisemitism.

There isn't a trove of English-language examples — Henry VIII banned miracle plays in the mid-16th century and a great many were subsequently destroyed — but it's safe to say that nothing from the shrouded past sounds remotely like Chiara Atik's "Poor Clare." This is a saint's play served up as an offbeat comedy millennials can believe in.

Miracle of miracles, it almost works.

Now receiving its world premiere in an Echo Theater Co. production at Atwater Village Theatre, "Poor Clare" offers a drolly modern take on the life of St. Clare of Assisi. Directed by Alana Dietze with the same ensemble finesse that she brought to her Echo production of "The Wolves," the play investigates the sorrows and pleasures of selfless goodness in a world sharply divided into preening haves and pitiful have-nots.

The year is 1211 in the Italian village of Assisi, but the manner of speaking is closer [See 'Clare,' E6]

## A modern take on saint's play

['Clare,' from E1] to Brentwood 2021. Close your eyes, and you might think you're eavesdropping on credit-card-wielding high schoolers at a luxury outdoor mall.

Jordan Hull ("The L Word: Generation Q") is divine as Clare, a kindly and rich 18-year-old whose hair and wardrobe are constantly being fussed over by servants (played by Kari Lee Cartwright and Martica De Cardenas). She's spoiled, but like a private school kid who starts thinking differently about the world after being exposed to a progressive social studies teacher, she starts questioning her own values.

Clare's transformation is precipitated by another future saint, Francis (a tart Michael Sturgis), who has renounced his wealthy background as part of his mission to end economic inequality. Clare doesn't understand why this son of a silk merchant is wandering around like a nutty mendicant, but she recognizes what they have in common and suspects he has much to teach her.

The play tracks Clare's dawning conscience as she goes from screaming at the sight of a beggar (Tony DeCarlo) to giving away impractical rich people's clothes to bestowing priceless jewels upon her maid.



COOPER BATES

JORDAN HULL, left, with Ann Noble, shines as the saintly lead in "Poor Clare."

### 'Poor Clare'

Where: Echo Theater Co. at Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Ave., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays, 8 p.m. Mondays. Ends Nov. 29

Tickets: \$10-\$34

Info: (310) 307-3753 or [EchoTheaterCompany.com](http://EchoTheaterCompany.com)

It's not long before she's wearing a hair shirt and sleeping on the floor with rats. Why should she be com-

fortable when unhoused families are sheltering in tents under the nearby bridge?

In the opening scene, we find Clare making small talk with her stylists about how pilgrimages to the Holy Land are "like, so much work and money!" Later, when Francis reminds her that she lives in a palazzo in the heart of town, she tells him, "It's not really a palazzo, it's more just a big house."

She's accustomed to downplaying her social status while benefiting from it. Her radicalism begins with a growing awareness of her hy-

poocrisy.

Neither Beatrice (a pungent Donna Zadeh), Clare's sweetly bratty sister, nor Ortolana (an astringent Ann Noble), her gently haughty mother, can talk any sense into a young woman who has grasped the fundamental cruelty of an unequal society.

Clare's dramatic path is inexorable, and therefore lacking in suspense. The play should have been tightened and presented without an intermission. But to a degree, the charmingly daffy anachronistic dialogue compensates for a plot that feels like a fait accompli.

There are no villains in "Poor Clare." Even the most superficial and self-protective rich characters have heart. Clare's interactions with the women in her life are playful and sympathetic even as she discovers that her ethics separate her from these clotheshorses. (The ostentatious finery, the work of costume designer Dianne K. Graebner, is divertingly paraded.)

The play is also laudably devoid of heroes. Francis is portrayed as snippy and effete, but his politics are more uncompromising than Bernie Sanders'. Ideologically impatient, he is perhaps more concerned with doing good than being kind. Sturgis plays up the piquancy.

Francis' influence on Clare leaves her increasingly isolated. I wish the play would have more fully entertained alternative modes of altruism, giving Clare a glimpse of a less lonely and self-abnegating future. But saints aren't middle-of-the-road types. Sacrifice and suffering are their métier.

Atik, recognizing that modern goodness is a conundrum, ends her play in prayer. Leaping into the present, Clare begs God for guidance: "Lord, give me strength so I don't retreat to the other end of the subway car, pulling my scarf up to my nose, but rather sally forth and ask, 'Do you need any help?'"

In the radiant humanity of Hull's tender-funny portrayal, true benevolence seems miraculously within reach.