

Poor Clare



Photo by Connor Bates

Echo Theater Company

As the ridiculously wealthy neophyte socialite Clare sits gossiping with her two attendants braiding her hair, the three giggle and dish as though they were a trio of Beverly Hills High School students getting ready to go hang out at the mall—after all, Clare (Jordan Hall) does have insider status at Sephora.

In Echo's world premiere of the once Covid-halted *Poor Clare*, playwright Chiara Atik pokes infectious fun at the thorny issues of entitlement and the overpowering specter of class and social position as her wincingly vapid and shallow characters drop names and whine about such modern institutions as Chipotle, Amazon, and Uber.

The clever twist in Atik's crafty new play is that despite calling one another "guys" and spouting their share of "not even"-s, these seemingly 21st-century ladies actually live in Italy in the year 1211 and our heroine is in fact Saint Clare of Assisi. Born Chiara Offreduccio in the year 1194, Clare was one of the first followers of St. Francis, the founder of the religious Order of Poor Ladies, and author of *The Rule of Life*, the first known set of monastic Franciscan guidelines for women.

Under the sharply-tuned direction of Alana Dietze and featuring an excellent and committed ensemble cast, the debut of Atik's fresh and uncharted take on the classic story shines with the sparkle of a newly polished diamond, leaving behind the usual esoteric and well-trodden bookish histories of these ancient events and delivers them directly into our own media-savvy times.

Atik's Clare, who prefers to be thought of as comfortable rather than rich, could easily be a Kardashian or a Hilton or one of the Housewives of Assisi, the difference being it's doubtful any of today's current crop of reality show-spawned darlings would ever have been remotely capable of experiencing the spiritual transformation that changed the life of one noblewoman eight centuries ago.

My partner works in the outdoor leadership field hosting many young wealthy LA kids and after the performance of *Poor Clare*, Hugh recalled something he overheard on an overnight camping trip a couple of years ago. Two kids around 12 or 13, one from Beverly Hills and one from Malibu, were discussing which community was the better place to live. The Beverly Hills kid was, despite the lack of one's own private ocean, defending his community as a great place to live. Still, after a moment's thought he innocently and quite earnestly added, "Unless you're poor, of course."

It's not often someone raised with great privilege can recognize and be able to communicate what it must be like to live in poverty. The fact that this playwright is not only capable of making that leap real and understandable for her characters while employing an extraordinary sense of contemporary humor makes this play an instant classic.

Dietze and company prove to be the perfect team to deliver Atik's message with skill and an equal grasp of what Atik is trying to communicate, that the injustices and inequalities in our world have not yet been conquered by any means all these centuries later—and that we as a species must stop looking away and living our comfortable lives while so many of our brethren continue to do without. As St. Francis tells the suddenly questioning Clare, "If you're rich, you're tacitly okay with poverty... there's no middle ground."

Hull is remarkable conveying Clare's metamorphosis from vapid teenager to radical social activist within the limitations of the play's two-hour runtime, culminating in a stunning Jeanne d'Arc monologue disavowing every comfort her world had to offer to become a lifelong penitent who fought tirelessly to rescue the poor and convince others to join her in her mission.

Ann Noble and Donna Zadeh are the perfect foils for Hull as Clare's well-meaning but socially unconscious mother and daughter, neither of whom ever present themselves as evil or uncaring but simply clueless, while Kari Lee Cartwright and Martica De Cardenas as their preening and genuflecting maids could easily be servants of today. Although De Cardenas appeared to have a little stumble with lines in the first pivotal scene, hopefully during the run that clumsiness can be chalked up to opening weekend insecurity.

As St. Francis, Michael Sturgis is a major asset to this production, breathing a quirky but all-too human self-deprecation and physical clumsiness into a historic character usually thought of only as a heroic figure. Although Francis prays four hours each night (“That’s always been my body clock,” he explains apologetically), he is quick to defend his mission as a noble one, including the idea that new cushioned pews in the dilapidated San Damiano church he is rebuilding singlehandedly might attract some followers to his cause. And although he worries his new sackcloth tunic has no matching pants, he is relieved it could go with any color.

Sturgis’ Francis is still able to pull himself out of his insecurities at the hint of being misunderstood, bristling at the thought that his mission is a product of his eccentricities rather than be seen as a movement. As he begins to change Clare’s “very limited worldview,” he remains unsure he’s quite ready for disciples. All he really wants is for people to accept him and his beliefs and to ask him “what my deal is.”

There’s still another character however, a homeless beggar who periodically shows up huddled in corners ready to scare the bejeezus out of Clare until she begins to realize how much alike they really are despite their disparate circumstances. Although Tony DeCarlo’s performance is full of quiet dignity and a palpable resignation, the role—and the entire debut of this auspicious new play—lives in the overpowering shadow of Robert “Buddy” Stoccardo, the actor originally cast in the role before the pandemic caused the production’s cancellation just before opening night.

Buddy, who left the planet last May after a lingering illness and a difficult isolation chronicled painfully on social media, was something of a legend in our LA theatre community. He was an unpredictable character with a multitude of ever-present personal problems forged by his own unfortunate life experiences, which sadly included spending time living on the streets himself. No one was more fervent about this production and having the privilege of sharing the play’s message than he was.

It’s surely not lost to anyone who knew Buddy Stoccardo why this production has been dedicated to his memory or why his presence seems to hover all around it, demanding us to be moved not only by Chiara Atik’s artistry and Alana Dietze’s ability to so impressively interpret it, but by the powerfully passionate convictions of *Poor Clare* that never quite changed the world despite everything she sacrificed to make it happen.

**THROUGH NOV. 29: Echo Theater Company at the Atwater Village Theatre,
3269 Casitas Av., LA. 310.307.3753 or www.EchoTheaterCompany.com**
