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Review

A diabolical thrill ride with smarts and wit

By **Philip Brandes** JULY 26, 2017, 6:40 PM online, reprinted August 5, 2017 CALENDAR [photo removed]

It wouldn't be the first time a reckless marriage led straight to hell. Rarely, however, has a spouse — however demonic — turned out to be literally Satan. Which somewhat raises the stakes for three sisters hoping a mysterious suitor will rescue them from desperate financial straits in "The Devil's Wife" at the Skylight Theatre.

Loosely adapted from an ancient Italian folk tale, prolific local playwright Tom Jacobson's delightfully creepy new postmodern fable makes an entertaining and thought-provoking debut, despite piling on a few more layers of self-aware metaphysics than its spare mythic underpinnings can ideally support.

Director Eric Hoff situates the story in an ambiguous but vaguely Spanish-American Gothic setting that stylishly befits Jacobson's whimsical mash-up of fairy-tale tropes and modern sensibilities. As in the original legend, the Prince of Darkness (Everette Wallin) successively woos three sisters in the guise of Nicolas Mastema, a wealthy, suavely seductive lawyer who promises to salvage their endangered family estate if one of them will marry him.

The only catch: His bride must never open the door to his cellar, which reportedly offers that which each visitor most desires. Oh, and there's a curious business involving a wooden staff bequeathed by the sisters' late father that Nicolas seems way too eager to acquire.

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Naturally, the temptation to cross the forbidden threshold proves impossible to resist, first for the beautiful but haughtily insecure Bonita (Mariel Neto), then for the sweet-tempered sexpot, Dulce (Alana Dietze). It's left to the brainy Sofia (Caro Zeller) to try to outwit Nicolas with a strategy that ultimately pits heaven against hell.

The sisters' strong personalities and motives are clearly represented, though the characters rarely venture beyond their broadly sketched archetypes. In the more nuanced central performance, Wallin invests the charmingly devilish Nicolas with unexpected romantic longing and existential depth, while also bringing pitch-perfect comic timing to his secondary role as Mastema's stooped, bearded servant (whose knowing smirk conceals yet another secret identity).

Jacobson's signature intelligence and wit are never in short supply, and running a little more than an hour the play elegantly poses an ever-deepening volley of sophisticated theological and philosophical questions.

The dialog's stylized, idiosyncratic flourishes — in particular, a heightened contemporary spin on the story's underlying subtext of female empowerment — don't always mesh with the framing conceit of a traditional folk tale whose individual contours have been burnished away through countless retellings.

Nevertheless, "The Devil's Wife" is a smart, satisfying thrill ride with a unique supernaturally tinged caution against depending on the kindness of strangers.

"The Devil's Wife" Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

When: Through Aug. 27, 8:30 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. **Where:** Skylight Theatre, 1816 1/2 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles. **Tickets:** \$15 to \$39 **Info:** (213) 761-7061,

skylighttheatrecompany.com