

The Devil's Wife

Michael Van Duzer



Why do folk tales resonate so deeply for us? There is something in their familiarity and their strangeness that speaks to a primordial impulse in all of us, a shadow psyche that is drawn to the darker and messier side of human behavior.

With *The Devil's Wife*, playwright Tom Jacobson has created an homage to folk tales, as well as a gentle send-up. Though Jacobson's characters are conventional storybook types, he peppers his dialog with sly witticisms and post-modern commentary.

The play opens in an atmospheric rain storm. The Ramirez sisters, Bonita (Mariel Neto), Dulce (Alana Dietze) and Sofia (Caro Zeller) have just returned from burying their father. Taking stock of their situation, the sisters realize that their hold on the family house and land is financially precarious and that an advantageous marriage may be their best option for financial security.

Though Sofia is the youngest sister, she is also the cleverest, and she has invited a lawyer to advise the family. In short order, Nicolas Mastema (Everette Wallin) appears and he is everything the family could desire. Dark, handsome and oozing sex, he has a proposition that he believes will save the sisters and protect their home. All he needs to set the plan in motion is to marry one of them. As the eldest, and the most beautiful, Bonita agrees.

Mastema tells Bonita that she is free to do anything in her new home but go down into the basement. If you've read any folk or fairy tales, you know where this is going. Bonita is unable to resist exploring the basement and, in disobeying her husband, she seals her doom.

Practicality winning out over delicacy, Mastema returns to the Ramirez manse looking for a new bride. Dulce is quite willing and travels with him to her new home. After weeks of non-stop and impressively athletic sex, Dulce finds she is also unable to withstand the temptation offered by the forbidden basement.

This sets the scene for the final confrontation in which Sofia will face Mastema and force him to reveal what lies beyond the door as well as his true identity as the Devil.

Jacobson has convincingly crafted a newly-minted folk tale that feels utterly familiar. Few writers would dare to throw in a Miltonian debate on God's responsibilities during a physical showdown.

Director Eric Hoff makes sure that the action never lags during the play's 80-minute running time. He also mines every laugh, but, perhaps, at the expense of the story's creepier moments. I think that, like a good Hammer film, the humor could enhance the horror rather than overwhelming it. Cudos to Fight Choreographer Mike Mahaffey for a brilliantly wince-inducing battle between Mastema and Sofia.

Both Neto and Dietze place the flaws of their deliberately stereotypical characters front and center to create two very funny performances. Zeller is fiery and powerful as the woman who will finally put the Devil in his place. It's a truism that the Devil always has the best lines, but an actor still needs skills to master the role. Wallin, with his supple voice, agile physicality, and intelligence commands the stage in every moment.

The Devil's Wife will play in rep with *The Lost Child*.

Skylight Theatre July 15 – August 27, 2017 SkylightTix.com