

The Devil's Wife

Reviewed by Deborah Klugman

The Skylight Theatre

Through August 20



Premiering at the Skylight Theatre under Eric Hoff's direction, Tom Jacobson's latest play is a delectable little fable about free will, human folly and the encounter of a non-believer with God, Hell and the Devil. The story, in which three financially imperiled sisters are wooed in turn by a handsome stranger, draws broad inspiration from an Italian folk tale, but Jacobson has recast the particulars of the plot, and placed questions about faith and how one deals with a flawed omnipotent deity at the nub of his narrative.

The setting is Mexico (or perhaps the American Southwest) circa the mid-nineteenth century. A landowner named Ramirez has just died, leaving behind three daughters —Bonita (Mariel Neto), Dulce (Alana Dietz) and Sofia (Caro Zeller) — with land but no cash, and no means of earning a living. Soon after their father's demise they're visited by a suave, good-looking attorney, Nick Mastemo (Everette Wallin). He proposes to marry one of them (he's not particular about which one) and, in exchange for a dowry of land, provide all three with financial security.

He first weds the eldest, the prim, money-loving Bonita, counseling her never to venture into the cellar, which of course she does, only to disappear into its depths. The same fate befalls the sex-crazed Dulce, whom he weds second, and it falls to the third sister, the scholarly, agnostic Sofia, to uncover what happened to her siblings and disentangle the mystery behind this enigmatic personage who charms and challenges her.

Despite its theological trimmings, *The Devil's Wife* is entertainment, first and foremost, and succeeds in spades as long as Wallin — whose role calls for him to double as Nick's wizened truth-telling servant — is center stage. Whether portraying the urbane sophisticated Nick or doubling as his bent and bearded servant, Wallin's timing and sense of nuance is consistently on point. Most importantly, he makes this fantasy tale almost credible by imbuing his elusive chimerical character with convincing human passions.

The other performances don't rise to the same standard. Perhaps because they view the piece as a fairy tale of sorts, Neto and Dietz substitute outsized mannerisms — pouts, simpers and a variety of poses— for authentic depictions of character. (For this, director Hoff bears some of the responsibility.) As the determined sister with a strong core, Zeller starts out on a more solid footing, but then lapses into declamation and attitude as the play progresses. This is unfortunate because the attraction between her character and Nick, established when they first meet, bespeaks the irony that the playwright ambitiously seeks to relay.

Jeff McLaughlin's lighting and Christopher Moscatiello's sound weave a fitting ambience for this supernatural tale. Sarah Figoten Wilson's period costumes and Mike Mahaffey's neatly executed fight choreography add fun elements to the mix.

Skylight Theatre, 1816-1/2 North Vermont Avenue, Los Feliz; Fri.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. through August 20. <http://skylighttheatrecompany.com> Running time: 75 minutes with no intermission.