



THE DEVIL'S WIFE - Skylight Theatre Company [photo removed for brevity]

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

If I am ever to be stranded on a remote tropical island with three contemporary playwrights, Tom Jacobson would be one of my choices. Stephen Karam, Sheila Callaghan, and Tom—and maybe Michael Michetti to direct us. Oh, and an unlimited supply of apricots.

This said, Jacobson's newest play, *The Devil's Wife*, would not be among my all-time favorites someone could airlift in wrapped in a big bundle with his many other great plays to keep us company, along with medical supplies and, of course, those mandatory apricots. Don't get me wrong—this play is as **bitingly funny and bordering on wickedly, slyly inappropriate** as any of his plays that came before it, but **although it's monumentally charming and slickly produced** by the committed folks at the Skylight Theatre Company, it doesn't stay with you and force you think about what it all means over the next few weeks or years as so many of his other plays before it have.

What I've always marveled over in Jacobson's body of work was the narrative challenges he's always put before himself in his complicated other plays. *The Devil's Wife* is a gothic-styled adult fairy tale appearing to be set in a mid-19th century undisclosed European location, something never made crystal clear, especially since Sarah Figoten Wilson's incredibly detailed lacey period costuming and Stephanie Kerley-Schwartz' richly-accented set recalling Don Diego's ranch in an old Zorro remake, bump up against the far more contemporary feeling of Jacobson's dialogue and the performers' playing style.

This rococo plantation drawing room is where the three Ramirez sisters (Alana Dietze, Mariel Neto, and Caro Zeller) join after having just buried their once-wealthy landowner father, mourning both his death and the fact that the old man left them with nothing besides a barren waterless expanse of land with nothing to till besides dust and a history fraught with that apocalyptic foursome: "floods, droughts, locusts, and lawyers." Their salvation comes from the unsolicited appearance of the dashing Nicolas Mastema (Everette Wallin), who offers a surprising solution. If one of the sisters will marry him, their estate will be saved and everything will turn out just hunky-dory. Right... where's the fun in that?

What follows is a fairly predictable morality tale, like Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm gone a little naughty, and as so, it works splendidly. The performances are all courageously over-the-top as they earnestly spout Jacobson's typically rich dialogue full of sly sexual innuendo. Why, even in the pouring rain, as Sofia (Zeller) meets their handsome champion for the first time, when she looks deeply into his eyes and tells him she's "wet," there's no doubt what the remark is supposed to conjure.

Director Eric Hoff does his best to conquer some of the play's challenges, but the periodic change of setting from the Ramirez estate to Mastema's mansion proves a difficult one to stage. Jacobson sends this up perfectly when Bonita (Neto) comes home and tells her siblings her new husband's place is nice, then suddenly turns to look around and say with sudden incredulity, "It's a lot like our own, in fact." What's most successful is Hoff's decision to place a lot of the transitions right before us, as the sisters dress each other at the lip of the stage or Christopher Moscatiello's lighting provides mysterious backlit ambience to increase the eeriness of the play's mysterious developments.

There are some Jacobsonian referrals to the thorniest throughline in his work, the place of faith and religion in modern life, and a subtly introduced subplot hinting at the empowerment of women is clearly buried somewhere in all this, but in general, the point simply misses and the end does not provide the unexpected twists one might wait for from the playwright.

Wallin transforms rapidly throughout from the noble-if-ominous Mastema into his hunched-over servant Ratel, who resembles a villain on an episode of Shelley Duvall's old *Fairie Tale Theatre*. Dietze is hilarious as Dulce, the sexually insatiable sister whose turn as Mrs. Mastema is a pleasure for her (literally), especially since she tells the others she has never before been so satisfied by anyone so physically "disproportionate."

Still it is **Zeller** who gives the **most indelible performance** as Sofia, lying somewhere between Olivia deHaviland in *The Heiress* and the character of Fosca in Sondheim's long-underappreciated *Passion*.

Kerley-Schwartz' set is suitably evocative, making one wonder what will happen to it in a couple of week's time when Jennifer W. Rowland's *The Lost Child* begins to share the stage—and the designer—in rep. **Wilson's costuming is just plain jaw-dropping**, not anything compromised by the barebones quality of most LA 99-seat theatre productions, especially these days thanks to a union once on our side but blatantly no more than a weight around all our necks.

For whatever might be lacking for me in *The Devil's Wife*, the Skylight's **impressive production** values and Tom **Jacobson's unique capacity to entertain** are not among the considerations. It's actually a kinda perfect choice for a mostly mindless night out of **summer fun, something desperately needed** as our beloved country spirals down into the crapper around us. If I wasn't such an avid devotee of Jacobson's work and had no previous reference to lead to a prevailing sense of disappointment since I probably was expecting too much, I'll bet it would have provided a much better time for me.

So. About that tropical island: I'll bring those apricots if someone will provide the parachute to fly in Tom Jacobson. I'm packed and ready anytime.

THROUGH AUG. 27: Skylight Theatre, 1816 ½ N. Vermont Av., LA. 213.761.7061 or skylighttheatrecompany.com