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Bad Dog: A Review; or One Woman's Less Than Humble Opinion

I had the pleasure of seeing the world premiere of *Bad Dog* by Rebecca Stokes on Friday night, the newest production of the Church of All Nations' Theatre Forum. Billed as a comedy about people and their obsessive love for their dogs, the play delivers what it promises. Even before the lights come up and the actors are onstage, the music brings the audience into the mindset of the characters with songs *Dirty Dog*, *Little Doggie*, *Where Did You Go?*, and my personal favorite, *I Want to Be a Puppy Dog*.

Once the lights come up, it just gets better. Most of the "set" is projected onto a backdrop behind the playing space, clever drawings provided by Joel Guerrero that use animation to show the audience where we are. The backdrop changes with each scene, showing the audience which character's apartment or house we are in as the lights come up and the new action begins. This device works well not only as a way to set the stage, but also to show us that the play is not meant to be taken as a regular performance piece. The characters are separated and alienated from each other, and the surreal backdrop-projected sets only serve to underscore this.

The stage is sparsely furnished with a couch, a chair, and doggie toys. As the show opens, it is clear that these people have little room in their house for much but their dog, and little room in their lives for each other. For though *Bad Dog* is a show that starts off as a comedy, and that continues to have comic elements woven through it to make the audience laugh loudly and long, it uses the characters' obsession with their pets to illustrate their alienation from each other.

The characters in the show run the gamut from a new age counselor, Uri, bent on seduction, (played smoothly by Tarek Khan) to a young man who thinks he is the re-incarnation of his girlfriend's dog, (played with sweetness and charm by Evan O'Brien.)

The married couple who open and close the show are Laurel and Hank, (played by deftly by Annette Guarrasi and Randy Harmon respectively). This couple is the life blood of the play. We watch the conflicts of the story played out between them as they try to reconcile their love for each other with their complete inability to communicate with anyone but their dog. The second couple in the show, Bruno the re-incarnated dog and Sylvie, the girl who loves him, (played with flair by Sarah Gavitt), also explore the theme of alienation as they try to take their relationship beyond the love of a girl for her dog.

All in all, *Bad Dog* is a wonderful show. The actors deal with each other honestly and with a depth of feeling that is refreshing to see in a comedy. And as the action of the show becomes more and more dramatic, the actors continue to bring warmth and compassion to the most desperate scenes, so that I was left feeling deeply for all of them, even the characters I initially was unable to like. All of this, of course, was brought about by the deft handling of the director, Russell Taylor, whose flair for treating every situation with compassion, whether comic or tragic, takes the audience by the hand and leads them safely through the morass of the minds of the characters, bringing us all, audience and actors alike, safely to the other side.

Ticket prices are very reasonable at \$18 for regular tickets and \$15 for students or seniors. Reservations can be made by calling 212-352-3101 or by going online to <http://www.TheatreMania.com>. The show runs every weekend from now until November 20th, including Mondays with shows at 8PM Fridays and Saturdays and at 7PM Sundays and Mondays. The performance space is at the Church for all Nations, 417 West 57th St., between Ninth and Tenth Avenues.

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