

# Play Dates



The war between the sexes has never been funnier than it is in *Play Dates*, Sam Wolfson's hilarious new comedy now playing at Theatre Asylum under the sparkling direction of Jennifer Chambers.

Dividing its romantic comedy into three very different yet interrelated acts, *Play Dates* positively zips by over its lickety-split ninety-minutes. Act One, *Boy Meets Girl* (based on a sketch by Wolfson and Richie Keen) introduces us to future couple Sam (Rob Nagle) and Stacey (Elizabeth Bond), beginning with their meet-cute first encounter on an elementary school playground at the ripe old age of five. Act Two, *Dr. Love*, has love-scarred adult Sam (AKA Dr. Love) giving tough-love advice on his eponymous radio call-in show. Act Three, *Honeymoon Period*, introduces us to Mike (Brian Monahan) and Katie (Krystal Marshall), a 30something couple whose marriage is running out of steam and in dire need of help from Dr. Love.

In the tradition of *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown*, *Boy Meets Girl* has its pint-sized protagonists portrayed by quart-and-gallon-sized adults. Unlike *You're A Good Man*, however, 1) the kiddies don't sing (though they do dance in an inspired sequence brilliantly choreographed by Heather Allyn), and 2) although they do indeed talk about kindergarten topics, they do so using adult speech pattern and turns of phrases, making their conversations all the funnier. Here's one example:

STACEY: So, what do you do?

SAM: (After a moment's thought.) Eat paste. How about you?

STACEY: Sales, girl scout cookies, mostly.

SAM: I'm a day trader ... in the lunchroom. Snowballs, Star Crunches ... desserts, mostly.

Over the course of his forty-eight hour romance with Stacey, Sam frets about asking the cute redhead out, faces competition from classmate Timmy (Monahan) and his "Big Wheel Bike," debates the wisdom of napping with his sweetiepie, confronts changes in their relationship once they've napped together, and burns with jealousy when Stacey reveals the number of boys she's already napped with—the very things adults deal with and with similar consequences, but on a child-sized scale.

In "Dr. Love," a deeply wounded Sam has grown up to become a Dr. Drew-like radio personality so disillusioned by love that he takes a hammer to a plastic bag of Necco Valentine candy hearts (the kind that say "Let's Kiss," "True Love," and "Sweet Talk") and pummels them to bits, then tells us what *he'd* like to see written on them: "It's Not You, It's Me," "I Think We Need A Break," and so forth. The bitter taste Stacey left in Sam's mouth is never far from Dr. Love's lips, and he's got his studio audience trained to respond with jeers whenever he mentions her name, which is often indeed. As for the advice he dispenses to callers and studio audience members, don't expect any pussy-footing around from the good doctor, who knows how to get results. A married male caller has scarcely opened his mouth when Dr. Love interrupts him with a succinct, "You're gay!" and before you know it, the closet doors are opened and the caller is giving the local weather forecast: "It's Raining Men!" Hallelujah!

*Honeymoon Period* opens with Mike and Katie grooming each other the way certain animals

(and longtime married couples) are wont to do, (e.g. she pops the zits on his back, he shaves her armpits). It's a sequence so gross-out hilarious that it's impossible to turn away from—or to stop laughing at. Sensing that something must be done to spark up a marriage gone so stale that neither partner leaves the room to fart, Mike and Katie decide to spice up their marriage by adding sexy, willing Wendy (Bond) to the mix, a threesome that ends with unpredictable results.

Wolfson's writing, which combines a love victim's cynicism with the soul of a romantic, couldn't be in better hands than those of the cast assembled by Green Beetle Productions for this "newly revised" return engagement a play whose initial, limited run last summer prompted cries of "Encore!" Nagle, Bond, and Monahan return to the roles they created, with Marshall replacing Kristen Lee Kelly, the better to allow Kelly to concentrate on her role as producer.

Nagle, one of the brightest lights of L.A.'s stage scene, proves once again with the roles of child and adult Sam that Versatility should be his middle name. It seems barely possible that the actor inhabiting the skin of innocent, optimistic young Sam *and* cynical older Sam should be the same thesp whose intense performances in *Sidhe* and *London's Scars* were honored with 2009-2010 StageSceneLA Awards for Drama. In *Play Dates*, Nagle reveals a mastery of comic timing, full body acting, and improv as well. As an added bonus, his brief, priceless bit as a gay waiter manages to be spot-on without a hint of hetero-actor condescension.

Bond's absolutely sweet, sassy, sexy performance as Stacey heralds an actress with the comedic chops of the best of Saturday Night Live's female contingent of stars. Monahan recalls a young Tom Hanks in a bevy of roles, from bored hubby Mike to obnoxious tot Timmy to a gung-ho elementary school gym teacher. As Katie, Marshall proves herself not only an accomplished comedienne but one heck of a good sport to boot.

Kurt Boetcher's terrific set design features a great big, versatile, vine-covered heart as its centerpiece, then opens up in Act Three to become Mike and Katie's bedroom and adjoining bath. Michael Mullen's costumes are feats of imagination and inspiration. Christian Epps' varied lighting plot is another winner from the talented designer. John Zalewski's topnotch sound design, which ranges from 80s power ballads to studio audience catcalls, completes *Play Dates'* all-around first-rate design package. Henry Fernandez is stage manager and David Campbell props master. Casting director Racquel Lehrman and producer Kelly deserve snaps for an instance of colorblind casting that ought to be the norm, rather than the exception, in Los Angeles theater.

Despite its primarily heterosexual focus, *Play Dates* is a show that can be enjoyed by audiences of any sexual orientation. The young gay male couple in the front row seemed to be having every bit as great a time as the straight folk around them, and this older gay reviewer felt likewise. And at the risk of offering a spoiler, romantics (and closet romantics) may well find themselves wiping away a tear or two at the ending Wolfson has conjured for Sam and Stacey and Mike and Katie. Rave reviews and enthusiastic word-of-mouth should guarantee *Play Dates* a bright future indeed.

Theatre Asylum, 6320 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood.

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--Steven Stanley  
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