



Jade and John (Abigail Marlowe and William Nichol) take their relationship from the web to Groundworks in Solange Castro's new play

Solange Castro

A Play About the Desperation of Love, Set in a Groundwork Coffee Shop (GO!)

ANTHONY D'ALESSANDRO | FEBRUARY 4, 2014 | 6:29AM

Back in 2005, *MadTV* alum Craig Anton wrote, directed and starred in the absurdist play *The Idiots* with co-writer and star Ron Lynch, about two out-of-touch, heroin-addled scientists. The play savored a long underground life for nine years in Chicago and Los Angeles, drawing heavy support from marquee comedians like Fred Armisen and John C. Reilly, who were all too happy to guest star in random performances.

In the wake of *Idiots*, Anton co-launched *The Tomorrow Show* with Lynch and Brendon Small, became an adjunct drama professor at Cal State Long Beach and continued to nab scene-stealing character roles on TV, such as the terminally ill ad agency partner Frank Gleason on last season's *Mad Men*. Anton has returned to the theater director's chair with L.A. playwright Solange Castro's local stage debut, *Changes in the Mating Strategies of White People*, now in its world premiere at the Lounge Theatre, handling its situational romantic comedy as adeptly as he did *Idiots'* absurdist hijinks.

Inspired by the mishaps and half-hearted personalities of the L.A. Internet dating scene, *Changes* tells the story of two couples. Jade and John (Abigail Marlowe and William Nichol) are trying to get it on after their introduction over the web, while Louise and Tyler (Gloria Charles and Kim Estes), a recently divorced older couple, are trying to keep it going.

At a Groundwork coffee shop, the intersecting couples encounter their partners, wearing their relationship philosophies on their sleeves.

Jade, a cynical chatterbox with enough verbal force to deflect any suitor, explains at the top of the play, "You can tell everything about someone within the first five seconds of meeting them." She's looking for true love, and is put off by John's easygoing attempt to find love through the women he beds. Nonetheless, Jade yearns for John; she'll go so far as to steal his wallet, just to get some more face time with him. Despite her high perch, Jade easily falls for cocksure guys with a set attitude toward life, including John's married, ad agency boss, Dirk (Brian Cousins), who is unabashed in his desire to bed women.

Meanwhile, Louise is content with life's third chapter as a single woman, happily occupied by her doctoral thesis on the mating habits of fish. Tyler, her ex, stops by frequently, pining for Louise, all too sorry about his previous infidelities.

Castro's *Changes* lives in a universe adjacent to that of the hysterical neurotics of Woody Allen's cinematic canon and one-act plays - flawed folks who cry about their vacancies, only to realize too late that what they're looking for is right in front of them. The characters in *Changes* wax their romantic philosophies a bit too often but enough to keep the audience members wondering about the dynamics of their own love lives as they leave the theater.

As Jade, Marlowe is a spitfire, armed with one-liners, who keeps the snappy pacing of *Changes* intact. Nichol naturally exudes a sympathy for John, even as he is the continual butt of Jade's deconstructions. Sarah Underwood Saviano has a scene-stealing cameo as Roxanne, the hot-mess therapist who convinced Louise to divorce Tyler. Never mind the fact that Roxanne lost her license for sleeping with a 22-year-old patient.

Anton flexes his creativity given the material's single setting. For instance, there's a bedtime texting scene between Jade and John, which the director pulls off poignantly with a split stage and cellphone lighting against the actors' faces. Anton also draws huge laughs with a fight scene among three characters, which, cleverly, plays out offstage. (Years later, one of the most memorable knee-slappers from Anton's *The Idiots* remains the five-minute scene change: As the lights go dark between scenes, a number of stagehands move out several set pieces in Marx Brothers - like fashion, only to change their minds halfway through and re-set everything they originally placed.)

In the end, *Changes* is about what happens while we're busy discussing the semantics of our love lives. "Love is all you want," Dirk tells Jade, "But if you wait around, you'll be like a cigar left around, burning down to ash."

The Lounge Theatre 2, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.; through Feb. 23. (323) 960-7887, www.plays411.net/changes.

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