

Dating shift depicted in new comedy

By NATHANIEL HAAS

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The observer of the ongoing revolution in dating culture would not be wrong to note the trend toward more casual relationships and the struggle of couples to interact in a way that produces a lasting bond. Hell, the particularly frustrated maverick might take to Facebook or the blogs.

Solange Castro wrote a play.

“I think people want to see their real lives reflected in art,” she said. “Even without technology, relationships are crazy and confusing, but technology has added this whole other level that has made it infinitely nuttier.”

Castro, a Yale graduate turned comedian, playwright and blogger, observed that all around her, people were just too lackadaisical about their relationships.

“The way people were dating seemed very college or high school — not very serious about finding or valuing a relationship,” Castro said. “There is a really high level of acceptance of living a single lifestyle and being casual in your relationships.”

There are now more single Americans by percentage than at any time in history, and Castro thought about juxtaposing a journey into a relationship with a journey into the single life. A Stephanie Coontz book, *Marriage History*, argues that society is experiencing a “dating industrial revolution.” Castro, who read the book, decided to depict a slice of that revolution on the stage, albeit under a slightly more politically incorrect title.

Changes in the Mating Strategies of White People, written by Castro and directed by Nebraska native Craig Anton, is set in contemporary Los Angeles and explores urban dating, technology and love. The play begins when two couples rendezvous in a coffee shop with radically different intentions: one has decided to meet in person after fostering an online relationship, and one has met to divorce after years of marriage.

“I had been spending a ton of time in coffee shops with people who have a social life there — [coffee shops] really are little communities,” Castro said. “I would go to Pete’s in my neighborhood and I would overhear Internet dates ... I think these coffee shops create these subcultures and tiny villages in which people interact.”

The play carries a universal message that is sure to appeal to a variety of audiences and effectively

contrast the single lifestyle with what it's like to be in a relationship.

“For the purposes of the characters, both have the desire to attach and the desire to be independent — it's really about the tension between being attached and being free or on your own,” Castro said. “I was writing about people in their thirties living this way, but everyone identifies with it — it's so universal because people from all age brackets are going through the exact same thing.”

For Anton, that juxtaposition between dueling desires and human relationships is every director's dream.

“What drew me to it, being an actor as well, it has the game involved within the relationships and within the dialogue. There is unlimited fun to be had with that,” Anton said. “I'm referring to the game in terms of relationships — as an actor, we always have to remember that it is never about the words spoken — it is always about the relationship and what's underneath the words.”

The constant search for a lasting bond forms the backbone of the play. “There are certain attachments that are hard to break, even if you tried,” Castro said. “Humans naturally want to attach to other humans.”

Given the potential of the script to lend itself to uproarious comedy, Anton decided to lead the play in the direction of depth, rather than slapstick.

“It's a smart, clever, well-written play, and I think a lot of it can be played with schtick comedy,” Anton said. “We discussed it quite a bit in these

key roles. We knew people who were really funny and could bat it out of the park, but we didn't know if the depth was there."

The play promises to leave viewers asking questions about the role technology plays as a mediator in human connection, and whether or not that role is beneficial.

"I want people to ask questions and talk," Castro said. "Relationships are hard enough without this technology that people hide behind because they can."

Anton agrees.

"We are constantly moving forward — results continue to unfold, and in the dynamic of relationships, especially today in our fast-paced society and the digital age we are living in, changes occur much more quickly," he said. "The play is a good pause to remind us of our value system."

Castro's message is one worth listening to. *Changes in the Mating Strategies of White People* opens Jan. 18 at The Lounge 2 in Santa Monica, and runs through Feb. 24. Tickets are available online at plays411.com.

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