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## A Date With 'Lulu'? You Could Do Worse

By Celia Wren

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If you have never seen an actor play a Siamese fighting fish, now's your chance. Not one but two performers portray those finned critters in Callie Kimball's "Lulu Fabulous," a smart-alecky but often amusing play that's essentially a piece of chick-lit minus the pink binding. Bristling with contemporary references and men-are-jerks attitude, this Phoenix Theatre D.C. comedy recounts the adventures of Lulu, a sex-starved D.C. resident whose experience with the city's singles scene is so daunting that she seeks companionship in two pet fish. When the devotion of Rex and Tex doesn't meet expectations, she flees to Maine, where she comes to terms with her dysfunctional family's past and suffers through a torturous session of speed-dating.

Local playwright Kimball has a barbed wit and an appreciation for zany situations, and she's hit on a form that capitalizes on those traits: a jazzy montage of scenes that slow down, speed up, rope in loads of characters and veer from naturalism to satire so hyperbolic it's surreal.

Her best sequences are the exaggerated ones, like the lickety-split survey of Lulu's failed romances, devoting a second or two of stage time each to men who turn out to be married, gay, slothful, duplicitous, emotionally flawed or

just plain crazy. A lampoon of a pretentious yoga retreat levels a few sly digs, and then there's the face-off between the karate-chopping Rex and Tex, who insult each other in cartoonish Asian accents.

When the spoofiness abates, "Lulu Fabulous" becomes somewhat less entertaining: Lulu's bittersweet conversation with relatives in a Maine nursing home, in particular, drags a little. But the play's earnest strands do demonstrate that Kimball has a flair for character: Lulu is a spunky, engaging protagonist with a keen eye for absurdity in human behavior, and her best friend, Amy, who dabbles in tarot cards and hangs out at Coyote Ugly, comes across as a maestro of caustic remarks. "Younger men are hot but they're a little skittish," Amy deadpans at one point. "They're like feral cats – sudden movements frighten them."

The playwright has lucked out with the casting of Mary C. Davis as the title character in this world premiere production. A vibrant and fearless performer who seems to light up when she delivers her character's confessional speeches, Davis wins one's sympathy with her very first lines. Rose McConnell is pleasantly mordant as Amy, and Alex Perez and Patrick Bussink's mischievous depiction of Rex and Tex makes the fish shtick pretty funny. The supporting actors, who also include Shelby Sours, portray numerous peripheral personalities.

Director Bridget O'Leary, who's also responsible for the pale pink semi-abstract set, shrewdly emphasizes the play's stylized aspects. An impatient bell, interrupting the remarks of Lulu's creepy



Alex Perez, left, and Patrick Bussink as Siamese fighting fish brought home for companionship by a desperate Mary C. Davis in "Lulu Fabulous." (By Chris McKenzie – Phoenix Theatre D.C.)

suitors, gives the failed-tryst scene the feel of a game show, and at several other points characters appear and disappear in windows cut into the backdrop, creating a sort of low-tech cinematic effect. “Lulu Fabulous” may lie on the same thematic continuum as another Kimball endeavor – the Web site LuckySpinster.com, which she founded, and her associated blog – but the play receives suitably theatrical treatment here, Fu Manchu-style fish and all.

*Lulu Fabulous* by Callie Kimball. Direction and set and sound design by Bridget O’Leary; costumes, Jennifer Tardiff; lighting, Marianne Meadows. Approximately 100 minutes. At the 1409 Playbill Café, 1409 14<sup>th</sup> St. NW. Call 202-441-9738.

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