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Non-fat Greek Wedding

Brides run circles around doomed grooms in DTC's rough 'n' tumble *Big Love*

BY ELAINE LINER

Some actors really throw themselves into their roles. Throughout the 90-minute drama *Big Love*, now playing at Dallas Theater Center's **Arts District Theater**, the six leading actors physically throw themselves hither and thither across a half-acre of open stage. They sprint, leap, twirl, waltz, cartwheel, windmill, swoon and slam themselves full-body into the pool-blue padded floor. One actor slings saw blades, another shatters crockery. Like a troupe of acrobats force-fed ephedra, these aerobically toned performers fly back and forth in a constant, crazy tornado of perilous choreography. There's barely a break for any of them to catch the breath they need to spew torrents of playwright Charles L. Mee's ragged rhetoric.

All the ferocious circus activity sends this high-concept piece, a loose "reimagining" of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women*, reeling nearly out of control. After a mini-marathon of blank verse and bruising pratfalls, the stage is littered with muscular bodies, bridal gowns, knives, blood, chairs, flowers and confetti. If enriched and enlightened is what we're supposed to feel at the end, exhausted is more like it.

Big Love offers dazzling spectacle, but it wears out its actors and its audience with relentless physicality and too many paragraphs of Mee's *faux* intellectual hooha. The characters, when they're not flailing about like moths in a jelly jar, speechify instead of speak, always at top volume. On Mee's list of heavy issues: male aggression, the plight of refugees, domestic violence, date rape and man-boy love, to name just a handful. Could have done without that wistful bit on man-boy love.

First performed at Louisville's Humana Festival three years ago, *Big Love* is getting a big buzz, popping up on the season schedules of dozens of regional and university theaters. It is the final play in Mee's "love trilogy" about unlikely affairs of the heart. In *First Love*, two septuagenarians experience their first real rush of passion. The second play, *True Love*, pairs a woman with her stepson for a comment on taboo relationships. *Big Love* completes the trifecta by tweaking Aeschylus' story of 50 headstrong sisters rebelling against their arranged group marriage to 50 of their foreign cousins.

In the original, written around 490 B.C., a small army of Greek sisters flees to Argos and pleads with the king for protection from their would-be husbands. Denied asylum, the girls agree to wed but make a secret vow not to let their despised spouses survive the first night of the honeymoon. *Big Love* updates the premise to here and now, replete with brand names,



Wedding bell blues: Lorca Simons, Kate Nowlin and Miriam A. Laube are runaway brides with murder in mind in Dallas Theater Center's *Big Love*.

Details

Big Love

Details: continues at the Arts District Theater through March 23. Call 214-522-8499.

references to Yeltsin and Julian Schnabel and some musical interludes, including the girls' kitschy version of Lesley Gore's "You Don't Own Me." These Greek women sail away from the altar on their family yacht. Three of them--Lydia, Olympia and Thyona--splash ashore on the Italian Riviera and beg a wealthy man for refuge in his hotel-size manor.

The sisters personify archetypes of womanhood. Brunette Lydia (Miriam A. Laube, who must tire of obvious comparisons to Marisa Tomei) is the feisty, smart one willing to give love a chance with the right guy, who may or may not be her intended, Nikos (Remy Auberjonois). Blonde Olympia (Lorca Simons) is a dimmer bulb who likes her men the way she likes her sex, rough and ready. Flame-haired Thyona (Kate Nowlin) hates men, love and sex, but admits she's exhausted from the energy required to resist all three.

When three Greek-American fiances--Nikos, Constantine (Adrian Latourelle, working a wad of gum in his jaws) and Oed (Markus Lloyd)--drop from a helicopter to claim their brides, the ladies' congenial Italian host (Mark Alan Gordon) tries to mediate a deal. The women appear to go along with the nuptials as planned, but will it be mass marriage or mass murder on their wedding day?

Such big questions. Such noisy goings-on about this little thing called love. Before Mee gets his couples down the aisle, there are hundreds of push-ups and round-offs and squat-thrusts to endure. Huffing and puffing, the actors of DTC's *Big Love* never shut up as they swim an ocean of stage, verbally defending their genders.

Constantine, spokesman for the grooms, complains how tough it is to be a manly man. "There's no such thing as good guys and bad guys," he says. "There are only guys, and they kill people. When push comes to shove and somebody needs defending, nobody wants a good guy. They want a man who can fuck somebody up."

The women launch a chorus of "Why can't a man be more like a woman?," yelling till they're hoarse and red-faced.

Man-hating resounds as *Big Love's* loudest theme. Thyona opines that men are "a biological accident...halfway in the twilight zone between apes and humans." Constantine doesn't help the suitors' image as sex-crazed gorillas when he tells the ladies to get used to being taken against their will. "Time itself is an act of rape. Life is rape," he says. "No one asks to be born and no one asks to die. We're all taken by force all the time."

Such ugly words in such a pretty show. Too bad there's no mute button to make *Big Love* more lovable. While the orations turn to twaddle early on, visually, the DTC production, reviewed at a preview performance, opens into a giant box of eye candy.

Costumes by Linda Cho are runway-perfect, with women in flowing dresses of white, black and red. The vast set, designed by Amale Andraos and Dan Wood, associates of big-deal Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, gleams with the harsh, precise lines of a lobby bar in a trendy hotel. Special effects include the fiances dropping from the ceiling like a SWAT team (stripping off jumpsuits to reveal white tie and tails) as the theater thunders with the deafening *thwap-thwap* of chopper blades.

Everybody looks great in *Big Love*. The actors are sleek and handsome, right down to the four silent, furniture-toting "ensemble" extras (including Brian J. Smith, last seen in a lead in WaterTower's *Laramie Project*). Sexual vibes from the three leading women jump off the scale. There's even some nudity onstage right away and a few humps of simulated fornication. This show bares more skin than any local cast this year. Yeeha for that.

For director Richard Hamburger, coordinating all this show-offy mayhem must have been like wrangling peacocks. He has succeeded in constructing a production as carefully posed as a slick

magazine layout. The problem is that, as a whole, *Big Love* seems designed to be looked at, not entered. It's distant, inaccessible. Trapped in snowy white dresses and a blizzard of constant motion, this play is as pretty to watch as an ice storm, and just as emotionally unfulfilling.

Much of the blame lies with Mee, a historian-turned-playwright fond of reworking Greek tragedies (*Orestes*, *The Trojan Women*, *Agamemnon*) for modern audiences. But with *Big Love*, he's tricked up the script with so many distractions, he drowns out his own commentaries on modern romance. When actors aren't slamming the floor like 'roid-raging stars of the WWE, they're belting pop tunes, or trying to shout monologues over blasts of Mozart, Mendelssohn and Wagner.

Only in the final moments do the characters take a moment to stand still and be quiet. Bella, the villa's traditional older mother figure (nicely played by Franca Barchiesi), surveys the damage wrought by the sisters' wedding fiasco and offers the women some simple thoughts on the nature of true love.

"Love trumps all. Love is the highest law," she says. "One day you'll find a good man...or not."

Not exactly a verbal somersault, but the truest thing anybody says all night.