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THEATER REVIEW

REVIEW: At TheaterWorks, 'Queen of Basel' is filled with passion, conviction and understanding

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Jeffrey Borak

Jeffrey Borak is The Eagle's theater critic.



Christine Spang and Kelvin Grullon in a scene from "Queen of Basel"

PHOTO PROVIDED BY MIKE MARQUES

HARTFORD, Conn. — The three characters in August Strindberg's "Miss Julie" take a walk on the wild side in "Queen of Basel," playwright Hilary Bettis' intense 2018 reimaging of the Swedish playwright's 1889 drama, which is being given a hard-driving, volatile production at TheaterWorks Hartford.

If You Go

What: "Queen of Basel" by Hilary Bettis. Directed by Cristina Angeles

With: Christine Spang, Kelvin Grullon, Silvia Dionicio

Where: TheaterWorks Hartford, 233 Pearl St., Hartford, Conn.

When: Through Sunday Feb. 26

Performances: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes (no intermission)

Tickets: \$25-\$65

Reservations and information: 860-527-7838; twhartford.org

Note: This show contains strong language and adult content. Recommended for ages 18 and up

COVID policy: Masks are required Saturday, Feb. 25 matinee. For all other performances, masks are recommended but not required.

The setting is a dingy storage kitchen at a swank hotel in Miami's South Beach. It is a sanctuary, refuge, of sorts, for Julie DeLana (a compelling Christine Spang), a vibrant, if also conflicted, self-wounding daughter of a powerful Miami real estate mogul who is caught between her public image and father's expectations on the one hand and her personal achievements and ambitions on the other.

Julie dances on the edge. Her mother died 10 years earlier of breast cancer. An alcoholic, Julie claims not to have had a drink in five years. Her father, who has been dubbed “the Condo King” by the Miami press, is in the midst of negotiating a major real estate acquisition with an Italian family that is attending her father’s annual bash at his own hotel during Miami Beach’s Art Basel, an intersection between North and Latin American art.

Like her father, Julie has lived much of her life in public. She is a darling of the paparazzi who follow her everywhere. One local publication has called her “the socialite heiress of Magic City.”

Julie has been whisked into this dingy space — evocatively designed by Rodrigo Escalante — by a cocktail waitress named Christine (Silvia Dionico) after the two bump into each other following a furious public argument between Julie and her father; causing the cocktails on Christine’s tray to spill onto Julie’s green ankle-length Oscar de la Renta gown.

In order to further protect Julie from the paparazzi, Christine has called her Uber-driving boyfriend, John (a sincere Kelvin Grullon), to come pick Julie up and drive her home.

“My girl’s got a big heart,” John tells Julie. “She’s trying to take care of you, but it’s her shift, it’s crazy, she’s losing tips, her manager threatened to fire her, but she would never tell you any of that because she’s too polite. So she texted me to take you home.”

Set within Miami’s Latine[cq] community, “Queen of Basel” is an intricate drama about power, entitlement, money and, most of all, identity — gender and cultural identity and imperatives; the rush to judgment and assumptions people make of each other based on class and cultural identity. It’s about the roles people are forced to play in order to get what they want, often diminishing themselves in the process.

John is of mixed Cuban and Haitian blood whose father, who fled Haiti on a raft, is doing prison time for an act of vandalism committed by John. As played by Grullon, John is a decent, somewhat cynical man with a touch of male swagger. He has a taste for wine. He enjoys taking things apart and putting them back together. He’s going to school so he can eventually start his own business in HVAC and TV repair. In response to a question from Julie, he acknowledges he believes more in lust, rather than love, at first sight. “I think love is... something you earn, then spend your life fighting to keep.”

When we first see Christine, she is seemingly all about cheap sex appeal. Her uniform form work includes a short wig; tight mid-thigh length black skirt; a tight black top with a red bra whose lacy top runs across the top’s décolletage. It’s a role Christine is required to play if she is to keep a job she urgently needs. Venezuelan by birth, she abruptly fled her native country for the U.S. six months earlier in the wake of violence leaving behind her mother and five-year-old daughter. She is seeking asylum and trying, together with John, to raise enough money to pay a smuggler to bring her mother and daughter to the U.S. When Christine reappears in the play’s final moments, it is the end of

her long shift. She is in her street clothes — jeans and a blouse. Gone is the costume and with it her air of subservience. This is a feistier Christine who proves she is as adept as anyone at making the compromises she needs to make in order to accomplish what needs to be accomplished.

The bulk of “Queen of Basel” centers on the provocative give and take between Julie and John, who is torn between his loyalty to Christine on the one hand and the wine emboldened sexual tsunami that seemingly envelops the two.

As played by Spang with tellingly layered passion and insight, Julie is a mass of conflicts — angry, bitter, hurt, smart, assertive, cynical, realistic, vulnerable; adept at hiding her vulnerability by living up to the demands of her public life despite her distaste for it.

“I hate these parties,” she tells Christine early in the play. “People are so fake. All they care about is status. Who has the most expensive jewelry, dress, car... Who just dropped a million on a painting an infant could do ... Who’s closing what business deal ... Everyone posturing for the cameras — you could be in the middle of a giant fight with your best friend, a photographer walks over, and suddenly it’s all smiles and laughter like life is perfect. If you don’t play along, they ... cannibalize you.”

Despite her smeared party girl public image and a philosophy that money can fix just about anything, Julie is an accomplished woman — an undergrad at Vassar with an MBA from Harvard, where she graduated top of her class, despite the obstacles thrown in the path of ambitious, educated, smart women.

“I worked my a-- off to get my MBA,” she tells John; “top of my class — and do you know what a woman has to endure to graduate the top of her class at an Ivy League business school? You have to work twice as hard just to be half as equal. You can’t just be a person when you walk into a room. You’re a conquest. You’re body parts to be judged and rated and picked apart, but you’re never actually a person. And if you’re rich? Forget it — everyone thinks you bought your way in.”

She has fought her own battles especially with a dismissive father who has every expectation that his daughter will take over the business when it’s time. Julie has other plans. She’s determined to make good on a deathbed promise to her mother, who gave up her own ambitions of becoming an OBGYN to marry her father. “She gave up her dreams for his,” Julie tells John. “She had to be this perfect housewife socialite, but there was never any room for her. So she made me promise, on her deathbed, that I would never give up myself.” Julie sobered up. “I wanted to reclaim our culture, so I went to Colombia, traveled all over Latin America — saw all this suffering and poverty — and ... It haunted me ... Unnecessary cruelty,” she says. Her ambition is to create a foundation that “supports, grows, and builds NGOs in developing countries like Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti” — women’s health centers. Her ambitions and her father’s come to a head at the party.

The extended scene between Julie and John bogs down in talk and, despite Christine's inviting body language, the sexual dynamics between the two feels more arbitrary than palpable. Still, under Cristina Angeles' shrewd direction, "Queen of Basel" moves through its intermissionless 90-or-so minutes with passion, conviction and a keen understanding of how, and why, cultural identity matters; more important, how easy it is to take people at face value when the currents that shape and move who we are as individuals run deep.

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