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## Greek Gods Meet Seething Suburbanites in 'BLISS' at Moxie Theatre

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A scene from "BLISS (or Emily Post Is Dead!)" at Moxie Theatre. Courtesy Ash and Arrow Photography

By Pat Launer

The world premiere at [Moxie Theatre](#) is the perfect play for this #MeToo moment.

An arrogant, narcissistic man cannot begin to fathom why any woman wouldn't want to sleep with (and worship) him.

Okay, he is a god — Apollo, in fact, scantily clad and irresistible (at least till he opens his mouth).

The fun of "BLISS (or Emily Post is Dead!)" is the mashup of Greek mythology and modern-day sensibility, set in the "Mad Men" era, on the cusp of the battles for women's rights and civil rights.

The desperate housewives of the 1950s say they feel like "indentured servants." Their husbands are physically or emotionally absent. To escape the drudgery and sham of their daily lives, they seek Better Living through Chemistry — addictive little green pills

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that take the edge off. (On opening night, the playwright confessed that the idea of hiding the pills in the vacuum cleaner came directly from her aunt).

The suffering helpmates of 1960 are given historical heft as stand-ins for the ill-fated Clytemnestra, Medea and Antigone, playing out the fate of their lives as cynical Clementine, happy homemaker Maddy and idealistic high schooler Antonia.

Into their lives swirls Cassandra, with her wild-eyed visions of the future that no one believes. The curse (gifted but unheeded) was placed on her by Apollo when she rejected his sexual advances. An eerily familiar punishment-for-non-compliance story.

But Cassandra is a forward-thinking woman. She tries to get the others to flout Fate, and make better, smarter choices for themselves, to live life on their own terms.

Her dreadful prophesies would ultimately come true — all those ancient women met ghastly deaths. But in the early '60s, the wheels of progress had begun to turn. Today, too, sisters are doin' it for themselves. Time's Up.

Among many intriguing facets of the play is the specter of [Emily Post](#), whose 1945 book, "Etiquette" (and its many updates and reprints) was the women's Bible in those days. Ironic that it was a fellow female who laid down all the constricting rules for how women should behave. Her death in 1960 facilitated the liberation, though the residuals of those rules dog us still.

Oh, and speaking of liberation, I should mention that this Cassandra is a black working woman (the only employed female in the mix) entering a lily-white New Jersey suburb and encouraging young Antonia in her romance with a black schoolmate.

There are many ideas in [Jami Brandli's](#) comedy, a finalist for the prestigious [Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's](#) 2015 National Playwrights Conference. Though her creation is inventive, intelligent and often funny, her points about free will are sometimes hammered home repetitively.

Brandli could not wish for a better production for her joint world premiere (after San Diego, separate productions will be mounted in L.A. and Chicago). Here, the piece is in the hands of the gifted, insightful former Moxie artistic director Delicia Turner Sonnenberg, who has marshaled a splendid ensemble and encouraged them to create juicy, multi-layered characters.

Morgan Carberry is deliciously snarky as Clementine. Lydia Lea Real (a new face, and a real find) is delightfully ditsy but deadly as Maddy. High school senior Taylor Linekin is earnest and self-possessed as Antonia. Alexandra Slade makes for a beautiful, other-worldly Cassandra, and Steve Froelich (who also plays Clementine's pill-dispensing doctor/lover) is buff, bronzed and braggadocious as Apollo.

The three candy-colored side-by-side rooms (designed by Victoria Petrovich) are stunning, and beautifully lit (Christina J. Martin). The sound (Matt Lescault-Wood) and costumes (Shelly Williams) are amusingly evocative.

The play could be shaped and trimmed a bit, but Brandli has a unique, intelligent voice that we're lucky to experience as her star rises.

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- **"BLISS (Or Emily Post Is Dead!)"** continues through Feb. 25, at [Moxie Theatre](#), 6663 El Cajon Boulevard near San Diego State University
  - Performances are Thursday at 7 p.m., Friday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m.
  - Tickets (\$28-\$33) are available at 858-598-7620 or [MoxieTheatre.com](#)
  - Running time: 2 hrs.
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Pat Launer is a long-time San Diego arts writer and an Emmy Award-winning theater critic. An archive of her previews and reviews can be found at [patlauner.com](http://patlauner.com).

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