

Review | Smart, snappy 'Bliss' gives tragic heroines a hopeful future



Taylor Linekin, left, Lydia Lea Real and Morgan Carberry in Moxie Theatre's "Bliss (or Emily Post Is Dead!)" (Karli Cadel Photography)



By **Pam Kragen**

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For nearly 2,500 years, women have been portrayed onstage as mercurial creatures, capable of great devotion and redemptive sacrifice but also betrayal and unspeakable cruelty. How much of that theatrical fiction reflects reality and how much comes from the fact that virtually all the playwrights have been men in a male-dominated world?

Playwright Jami Brandli smartly upends theatrical history this month in her hilarious, sharply written and fast-paced comedy-drama “Bliss (or Emily Post is Dead!),” which opened Saturday at Moxie Theatre in a world premiere co-production with L.A.’s Moving Arts and Chicago’s Promethean Theatre.

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- Clytemnestra, Medea, Antigone and Cassandra —
ping housewives are just as repressed and driven to

desperation as women were in the 5th century B.C.

In director Delicia Turner Sonnenberg's nimble hands, the play begins as a tart and very funny romp, then twists into, no surprise, tragedy, before ending on a note of hope and social change as the walls of Mount Olympus (or in this case, North Orange, N.J.) come crashing down.

The change-maker in "Bliss" is Cassandra, the princess cursed by the vain sun god Apollo to foresee the future but no one believes her. She hopes to cancel the curse by convincing the women of North Orange of the truth in her prophecies and change the trajectory of all their lives.

Without intervention, Medea (who is the high-strung homemaker Maddy in "Bliss") will repeat theatrical history and kill her children as revenge on her cheating husband, as she did in Euripedes' "Medea" in 431 B.C. Clytemnestra (here the unhappily married Clementine) will kill both her cruel husband, Agamemnon, and his war prize, Cassandra, as she did in Aeschylus' 458 B.C. play "The Oresteia." And Antigone (here an abused teen named Antonia) will sacrifice her life for honor, as she did in Sophocles' "Antigone" in 440 B.C.

Everything about Moxie's production sparkles, from the snappy direction by Sonnenberg and her assistant Hannah Logan, to the fine cast, the bright tri-tone set by Victoria Petrovich, the starched '60s crinoline costumes by Shelly Williams, the upbeat lighting by Christina J. Martin and the perky period music by sound designer Matt Lescault-Wood.

Morgan Carberry has near-terminal ennui as Clementine, who secretly delivers "happy" pills to her neighbors in a Hoover vacuum and has fallen hard for the town's kindly Dr. Smith (Steve Froelich, who also plays the amusingly ridiculous Apollo).

As the etiquette-obsessed, crumpet-burning Maddy, Lydia Lea Real is barely hanging on to sanity with her freshly polished fingernails. As Cassandra, Alexandra Slade is both comic and canny as she manipulates the dull-witted Apollo and pleads her case with the post-Trojan women. And Taylor Linekin, a senior at the San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts, makes an impressive debut as Antonia, who finds her honorable calling as the Civil Rights Era dawns.

In Brandli's play, Maddy is dazzled by the modern marvels of Jell-O, space travel and instant mashed potatoes, but she's blind to the restrictive Emily Post-penned social mores that limit her options. And one of Cassandra's visions of 2017 America shows women's rights haven't advanced as far in 57 years as the should have.

But some characters do find their bliss in "Bliss," which is cause for some hopeful feminist celebration.

"Bliss (or Emily Post Is Dead!)"

When: 7 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays. Through Feb. 25.

Where: Moxie Theatre, 6663 El Cajon Blvd., Rolando District (near San Diego State University)

Tickets: \$23-\$33 (\$43 opening night); discounts available.

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