

Theater



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NO RHINESTONE
UNTURNED Arntson
and Littleton hope to
bedazzle Chicago.

Country road

Parody duo Doyle and Debbie bring their Music City satire to the Windy City.
By **Margaret Littman**

In Nashville, it's not unusual to see bumper stickers that read, "Whine Whine Twang Twang." When a local complains on Facebook about her day, someone is likely to retort in the comments, "whine whine twang twang."

The quip is courtesy of one of the songs from *The Doyle and Debbie Show*, a Tennessee live music and comedy staple. In Music City, there's no shortage of tongue-in-cheek live music performances. But few have the kind of following of Bruce Arntson, Jenny Littleton and Matt Carlton, who bring their creation to Chicago this week for an open-ended run at the Royal George Theatre. In addition to the bumper stickers and the constant quoting, *Doyle and Debbie* is the kind of show locals see multiple times, often bringing visitors in as a piece of their tour of must-see Nashville.

Part *Colbert Report*, part Grand Ole Opry, the two-act show is a hybrid of hilarious parody and loving tribute to old-school country, told through songs such as "When You're Screwing Other Women" and "Barefoot and Pregnant." Arntson developed the personas of Doyle and Debbie and wrote the has-

been country duo's songs with Littleton's mimicry talents in mind. Country fans will recognize, for example, her emulation of Tammy Wynette; others will just howl at lyrics like "Just give me those fat women in trailers / Their husbands are in jail / Fat women in trailers / Their shoes come in the mail."

"I don't think it was terribly intentional or smart on my part," says Arntson, who also plays Doyle. (Carlton is the duo's accompanist and sidekick, Buddy.) "When we first did it five years ago at [Nashville coffeehouse] Bongo Java, we didn't know if we would offend people. But I love this old country music and I love old-time vaudeville."

Within a year the show moved from the coffee shop to the Station Inn, a legendary (albeit divey) live music venue in Nashville. It has been regularly selling out for almost five years. Obviously, audiences have taken the jabs in the spirit in which they were intended.

But the Chicago run is the big time for Arntson, who grew up in Minnesota and has worked as a songwriter in Nashville for 30 years. "Second City, Nichols and May. Those are my comedy heroes. Chicago is a comedy town. This is a step up the comedy ladder," he says. The trio has rented three apartments in a Gold Coast building to make the most of their time in town.

The show's set in the 200-seat Royal George cabaret will replicate the low ceilings, beer signs and dark VFW-hall ambience of the Station Inn. *Doyle and Debbie* has traveled elsewhere, including New York, Ann Arbor and Littleton's favorite, Fargo, North Dakota. While they've never changed the lyrics or the

book, the performers expect Chicago audiences might respond to different elements than an audience more used to rhinestone-clad singer wanna-bes.

"It will be different—not bad different," Arntson says. "There are lots of ways you can approach the humor in this show. It's fairly dense. You see things you don't expect at face value. In Nashville they laugh at different things than they laughed at in Ann Arbor." But there will be nothing about which to whine.

The Doyle and Debbie Show begins previews Tuesday 11 and opens October 17. See *Touring shows*.

“Chicago is a comedy town. This is a step up the comedy ladder.”

Becky Shaw



A Red Orchid Theatre (see Resident companies). By Gina Gionfriddo. Dir. Damon Kiely. With Lance Baker, Jennifer Engstrom, Mierka Girten, Dan Granata, Susan Monts-Bologna. 2hrs 20mins; one intermission.

Gina Gionfriddo's cynical comedy is blazingly clever in pieces, but makes for a choppy, indistinct whole. Let your eyes go unfocused, like you're staring at one of those trippy optical-illusion posters that were all the rage at shopping-mall kiosks in the '90s, and you might sense the playwright's aspirations to classical themes and literary allusions (the titular not-quite-heroine owes a little something to Thackeray's Becky Sharp). Moment to moment, however, *Becky Shaw* is oddly paced, meandering, entertaining but confounding.

The action centers—to use the term loosely—on a blind date gone incredibly wrong. Neurotic Susanna (Jennifer Engstrom) and her granola-crunchy new husband, Andrew (Dan Granata), set up Susanna's lifelong friend Max (Lance Baker, resembling James Spader's haughtily sociopathic character on *The Office*) with Andrew's temp coworker Becky (Mierka Girten), a wounded bird whose talons have a deceptively strong grip. The aftermath of their date, and the slow, sly reveal of everything that happened on that fateful night, make up the meat of the plot.

Frustratingly, none of that comes about until after intermission. The long, languid opening scene takes place a year earlier, establishing both the sort-of-sibling relationship between Susanna and Max and the newly tightened financial straits of Susanna and her firebrand mother, Susan (the terrific Susan Monts-Bologna). For all the amusement of Gionfriddo's zinging one-liners and the fully inhabited characterizations by the fine ensemble, few of their actions seem credible. Worse, it's never clear in Damon Kiely's production what, exactly, is the point.—*Kris Vire*



DATE CRIME
Girten and Baker set out for trouble.