

## Nashville Scene

Actors Bridge's *Hearts Like Fists* proves to be a spirited superhero romp

## Heart Attacks

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ARTS AND CULTURE - THEATER

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Actors Bridge Ensemble kicked off its 20th anniversary season last weekend — in spirit, practically a literal kick, given the performance of Adam Szymkowicz's *Hearts Like Fists*, in which a team of lady superheroes take down the baddie, martial arts style.

The play has an interesting history, having first launched in Los Angeles in August 2012 despite an Indiegogo campaign that reached only 26 percent of its goal. (Take heart, would-be producers: You *can* do it on your own!) Later, an Off-Off-Broadway production in Queens attracted serious attention and lots of reviews — enough to inspire some subsequent regional activity.

Enacted tongue-in-cheek, with an abiding reverence for comic books and cartoonish action-adventure — missing only the *POW! SMASH! BOFF!* on-screen titles of the old *Batman* TV series — *Hearts Like Fists* nevertheless offers a crafty and engaging tale about the risks of love and the world of pain in which it too often operates.

The plot is good-versus-evil basic but not without its more interesting textures. Dr. X (Jack E. Chambers, looking suspiciously like Bryan Cranston as *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White) is on the loose, injecting happy couples with a lethal poison. Like the best villains, X has a backstory, and in this case it's one many can relate to: failure and frustration at love.

Meanwhile, the lovely Lisa (Britt Byrd), a heartbreaker whom we learn is actually paid to stay away from men, meets a young doctor named Peter (Jess Darnell), who has his own physical heart problems, and is thus designing an artificial replacement that will never break. (Good luck, buddy!)

Enter The Crimefighters, a trio of elite badass females, who enlist Lisa and embark on trying to stop Dr. X. Determined as they are, they too have their issues: Jazmin (Brooke Gronemeyer) is a one-night-stand kind of girl; Sally (LaTorus Givens) has a thing for The Commissioner, the unseen figure of authority; and Nina (Cassie Hamilton) is obsessed with Dr. X, of all people. Nurses by day, The Crimefighters are also in close contact with The Nurse (Kara McLeland), who apparently has a history with Dr. X herself, although she pines for Peter. (See how messy love can be?)

The occasional hospital scenes seem in concert with the soap-opera aspects of this stewpot of story threads and half-clichés. But it's all scripted with a consistent sense of dramatic fun and staged — jointly, by Jessika Malone and David Ian Lee — with energy, good focus on the meaningful dialogue, and enough in the way of physical-combat exchanges to satisfy the well-saturated contemporary audience (if not offering anything near the orgiastic mano-a-mano pleasures of, say, *Kill Bill*). The fight choreography is credited to co-directors Lee and Carrie Brewer.

The setting is spare, darkly atmospheric, enshrouded with mist, and features sudden shafts of glitzy white light courtesy of designer Richard K. Davis — all aimed at keeping us ensconced in the story's noirish world. In addition, the exterior catwalk at Belmont's Black Box Theater comes into rare play as a staging area, providing some welcome spatial digressions and affirming that what we're viewing is anything but mundane.

Perhaps the show's most admirable creation is the adroitly planned-out score by Eli Van Sichel, which incorporates all the sound effects that make the fight scenes work so well (some in hilarious slo-mo) but also the musical bits that accent the action, sometimes with delicious irony (e.g., "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing," Eric Carmen's "All by Myself").

"No one should be happy," says Dr. X, who more than once is compelled to reference his "face like a bowl full of worms" and his fixation with "the girl with a face like a plate." Poor guy. In our most desperate Philip Marlowe moments, we might relate, but The Crimefighters are clearly on the right side of this struggle, and *Hearts Like Fists* is the successful cardio stress test that confirms the diagnosis.



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*Hearts Like Fists*

Presented by Actors Bridge Ensemble

Through Sept. 20 at Belmont's Black Box Theater

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