

new leaf



Vox Pandora by Bilal Dardai
Directed by Jessica Hutchinson

REVIEWS



★★★★☆

Picking up where the Greek myth left off, Bilal Dardai imagines that after releasing all the world's evils, leaving only Hope behind, Pandora's Box has been passed down through generations of women charged with keeping the Hope chest safe. It's been inherited by Eleanor (Dana Dardai), who discovers that Hope (Bennett) has made quite a comfy home for herself in the box, manifesting the world's hopes—revolutionary leaders, surgical procedures, racehorses—as abstract-expressionist paintings. The box is soon tracked down by an ambitious politician led there by one of its ex-tenants, a zoot-suited “deception” (Duhigg). The politician convinces Hope that she can do more good by stepping outside the box.

Bilal Dardai's premiere is imaginative and enjoyable, but it suffers slightly from an inconsistency of tone. The first act's quippy, goofball approach to the metaphysical recalls another of this season's new plays, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's *Say You Love Satan*; call it “metawhimsical.” Act II hops 12 years into the future, going all serious on us and focusing on Hope's role in the politician's campaigns. Perhaps that's intentional—the outside world is darker and all that—but it's a jarring shift. It doesn't help that Eleanor, who seemed to be our focal character, all but disappears. Hutchinson's inventive, thoughtful staging helps us mostly overlook the structural issues (and Nick Keenan distracts us with one of the best sound designs in recent memory). The cast is fine all around, but Duhigg steals every scene he's in—naturally, evil gets all the best lines.

—Kris Vire



RED-LIGHT DISTRICT
Heep generates an eerie glow.



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Chicago Tribune



Outside-the-box thinking is stuffed back in the box -- Pandora's box, that is -- in Bilal Dardai's "Vox Pandora," a new play about the mythology of hope versus evil (with a contemporary political spin) in a production from New Leaf Theatre.

A young woman named Eleanor inherits the box from a dead aunt, and is instructed to care for its contents -- or rather, its lone resident, Hope, who was trapped in the box when Pandora slammed the lid shut after unleashing beastly ills on the world so many eons ago.

Eleanor (Dana Dardai) is not sure what to make of Hope's literal presence (played by Alexandra Bennett with a Martha Plimpton-like coolness), but reveres her all the same. Only a jerk would squash hope.

But the status quo is threatened when an ambitious politician (Christian Heep) persuades Hope to leave the box and work exclusively on his campaign, and it is here that Dardai starts circling around some interesting ideas, including that old chestnut about the ends justifying the means.

America, as he rightly points out, is awash in a strange brew of cynicism and unrealistic expectations, but he never fully clarifies his points, which are far too inscrutable.

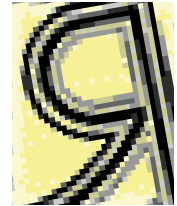
On top of that, director Jessica Hutchinson seems lost within the play's whims, and is unable to do justice to the script's humor. Too often, Dardai's wit falls flat. In theater, I'll take humor any day over hope.

—Nina Metz



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Chicago Reader

Vox Pandora Bilal Dardai, whose credits include work with the Neo-Futurists, wrote this surprisingly mirthless mash-up of Greek mythology and heavy-handed political allegory: centuries after Pandora opened her box of evils, Hope--though to some degree effective in the world--still chooses to remain inside. That changes when she's persuaded to ally herself with an Obama-like politician who also happens to be in cahoots with a smooth-talking embodiment of deception. Dardai's intelligence and compassion are clear, but the play is a ponderous, long-winded affair laden with exposition and symbols. New Leaf Theatre's earnest production does little to allay the script's longueurs.

- *Zac Thompson*



REVIEWS

“Way Off Loop” Inside Publications

Hope and politics mix like liquors; the combination is irresistible, but often ill-advised. In “Vox Pandora,” Bilal Dardai’s new play premiering at New Leaf Theatre, the audacious emotion’s place in American public life is explored in a thoughtful and charming allegory.



Centuries after Zeus released a swarm of evils on the world, Hope (the sure-footed Alexandra Bennet) still lives and works in Pandora’s box, protected by Pandora’s likable young ancestor (Dana Dardai.) One day, a too-good-to-be-true politician (the rather presidential Christian Heep) arrives with a scheme to get her out, and save America. The metaphor is almost too straightforward, but Dardai’s solid characterization, and smart-aleck dialogue, along with New Leaf’s fine actors, makes the play work. Oddly, it’s the most flatly allegorical characters that have the most vivid interior life. The politician is serviceable, if oblique, but Hope is a genuinely surprising being, lovable, slightly odd, and anything but a Pollyanna. (Equal credit should be given to Bennet’s performance.) In a world where politicians are focus-grouped till they barely seem human, Dardai gives us mythical personifications we can care about.

—Reina Hardy