

Review: 'Bad Jews' battle in Lab Theater comedy



CHARLES RUNNELLS, CRUNNELLS@NEWS-PRESS.COM 9:30 a.m. EDT March 17, 2016



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Right off the bat, you hate [Daphna](#). Really, really, *really* hate her.

In the skilled hands of actor [Stella Ruiz](#), this shrill woman with a Torah-sized chip on her shoulder is almost unbearably overbearing. Just the sound of her screechy nasal voice gets under your skin.

It's almost too good of a performance, in fact. Especially in the beginning. You hate the vicious, manic Daphna so much, it gets hard to like the play she's in: the black comedy "Bad Jews" at Lab Theater.

Thankfully, things get more tolerable once Daphna's cousin Liam ([Matt DeNoncour](#)) shows up at this riverfront apartment, and suddenly Daphna has something to push against. She's no longer railing against her poor cousin Jonah (a pleasantly mellow [Daniel Cancio](#)), who valiantly struggles to stay calm and impartial amidst the turmoil. She's battling her antithesis: A so-called "bad Jew" who hates her zealotry and fails to see the importance of Hebrew names, religious medallions and tradition.

Not coincidentally, that's also when the play finally starts to get funny.

It's fun watching these two polar opposites battle it out onstage. At issue is their dead grandfather's chai medallion, a family heirloom he kept hidden under his tongue while being held in a Holocaust camp. They've just got back from the man's funeral, and Daphna wants the necklace for its religious significance. But Liam has other, more down-to-earth plans.

Cue the shouting.

There's more going on here than just a battle of wits, though. [Joshua Harmon](#)'s play dives deep into the value of religious tradition and what it's like to hold onto those traditions in the 21st century. Liam sees it as stuffy and outdated. Daphna — who used to be Diana but changed her name to Hebrew — sees it as a crucial link to her past and her people.

This could be a deadly boring discussion, though, if "Bad Jews" wasn't so funny and entertaining. It starts out a little shaky in the beginning, but then director Stephanie Davis and her cast keep the tension and the laughs coming for the rest of the 90-minute, one-act comedy.

Along the way are many savagely funny moments. For example: Liam's extended, go-for-broke tantrum over Daphna's intense self-righteousness. It starts with the use of a certain [C-word](#) and ends with him red-faced and pounding a pillow that he imagines to be Daphna's super-smug face.

Then there's Liam's bland shiksha girlfriend ([Kate Dirrig](#)) — the ironically named Melody — singing an opera aria that you have to hear to believe. Trust me on this one.

And Ruiz, of course, is a must-see. Her Daphna is a shrill, judgmental "uber-Jew," a fidgety locomotive that plows over everybody in her path. It's funny watching just how deep her mean-spirited self-righteousness goes.

Who's really the bad Jew here? That's all a matter of perspective. But my money's on Daphna. She's not just a bad Jew — she's a horrible one.

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If you go

What: "Bad Jews"

When: Now through March 26. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday with select 3 p.m. matinees.

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown [Fort Myers](#)

Tickets: \$25 (\$12 for students).

Info: 218-0481 or LaboratoryTheaterFlorida.com (<http://LaboratoryTheaterFlorida.com>)

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