

# Theatre by Numbers


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## Review: "Gentle" (TUTA Theatre Chicago)

📅 March 6, 2017    👤 Sarah Bowden

**Show:**  
"Gentle"



Tom Dacey Carr and Dani Tucker/Photo by:  
Austin D. Oie.

## The "Dice" Rating Scale

d20 = One Of The Best

d12 = Heckuva Good Show

d10 = Worth Going To

d8 = Not Bad, Not Great

d6 = Has Some Merit

d4 = Not Worth The Time

**Company:** TUTA Theatre Chicago

**Venue:** The Den Theatre (1333 N Milwaukee Ave)

**Die Roll:** 20

“What’s happening?” I asked my friend. “I’m already nervous.”

A man had walked onstage, looking severe in a business suit and holding his own shoes. Something was wrong, though I had no idea what. I sensed bad news, and my instinct turned out to be correct.

In TUTA’s “Gentle,” a theatrical adaptation of a short story by Dostoevsky, the man’s (Tom Dacey Carr) serious nature and bitter disposition do, in fact, harm those around him. He is a pawnbroker, and he happily parts people with their keepsakes, secure in his knowledge that he need only run his shop long enough to raise funds for a new life and career. His plans change once he encounters a young girl (Dani Tucker) desperate to escape her awful family. He offers to marry her, and confident of his rescue, he sets out to make her the model wife for him. His housekeeper (Lauren Demerath) approves of the match, but keeps a watchful eye on the girl, concerned about the pawnbroker’s silences.

The pawnbroker narrates the story to the audience, and it is clear from the first moments of the play that his tale is a tragic one. Adapted and directed by Zeljko Djukic, the drama is trimmed with Dostoevsky’s religious themes; the Virgin Mary and Jesus serve as the ultimate

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### How It Works

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Dani Tucker/Photo by: Austin D. Oie.

paragon of selfless love, and everyone else falls short. What eludes the people onstage is crystal clear to the audience, as an icon hangs over the proceedings. Djukic must preserve Dostoevsky's tone while bringing his words into a real world inhabited by dialogue and scenic conflict. This proves difficult, as Dostoevsky's abstractions about love and faith rarely lead to concrete choices being

made before the audience. Djukic has actors delivering long speeches about the day-to-day life of the household, and it can be difficult to tie one event to the next, especially since the pawnbroker bathes the girl in disapproving silence, often to teach a lesson. There is a lot of monologuing between domestic squabbles, and most of the girl's relevant activities occur offstage, so we understand only what the pawnbroker perceives. This is clearly the point of Dostoevsky's tale, but tense silence can only keep its sharpness for so long, when enacted onstage. I found myself frustrated by the pawnbroker's lack of insight, though Djukic alleviates the annoyance with his hero by cleverly having his characters move about the space and shift props in a variety of ways, showcasing how the man of the house, his wife, and the housekeeper control various aspects of one another's daily lives.

The actors are uniformly excellent. Carr never begs the audience's sympathy, barely earning it when he attempts a fragile act of love at the story's end. Throughout, he is stubborn and exacting and clings to a

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belief that he is unlovable. Tucker must complete a harder task. She must remain a mystery while still seeming more in touch with her emotions and empathy than her husband. She becomes a literal whirling dervish at one point in the script, and I absolutely could not blame her desperate need to be seen and accepted as she is. Demerath is delightful as the housekeeper, using a shuffling walk and wry smile to suggest that she is more in touch with humanity than the others.

The production design is impeccable. Keith Parham's lights flicker on and off, suggesting a world on the verge of crumbling. Kurtis Boetcher's scenic design evokes nineteenth century traditions, with a border framing the pawnbroker's immaculate rooms, where people appear as if out of nowhere. Natasha Djukic's costumes reflect the smoldering inner life of each character, changing with the seasons, and offering some relief from the blank whiteness surrounding the actors.

The pawnbroker troubles his wife because he cannot see past the borders of his life. He believes people should act in certain ways and express themselves appropriately. Everyone must adhere to his views. The way he stares at the audience, daring us to contradict him, mirrors this. We have right to be nervous. We will be given no ground in his world.

**TEN WORD SUMMARY:** *Lonely man grapples with mysterious wife in well-designed production.*

**RATING:** *d10 – "Worth Going To"*

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