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# It's a funny thing, divorce: Michele Traina and a cast of comics riff on relationships in 'Divorce Diaries' at Zanies



By ZACH FREEMAN  
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Comedian Michele Traina in "Divorce Diaries" at Zanies on Wells Street in Chicago. (Kristen Norman / Chicago Tribune)

Most people don't particularly relish delving into the failures they've experienced in life, especially not in front of a group of strangers. But most people aren't stand-up comics. On any given night, a stand-up might rehash a number of embarrassing or difficult life experiences for the edification of an audience. With that — and a specific life experience of her own in mind — New Jersey comedian and teacher (and divorcee) Michele Traina has created a comedy show centered on the dissolution of marriage (her own and others).

But despite its catchy and precise title, "Divorce Diaries" — a show Traina hosts monthly in New York City and which she brought to the Zanies stage in Chicago for two nights this week — is more an outlet for talking about relationships in general than divorce specifically. Make no mistake, the "D" word definitely gets thrown around a lot and two large Chicago divorce law firms were represented — and repeatedly name-checked — in the audience Tuesday night, but Traina and the three other comedians she brought to the stage covered a wide range of topics in

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Traina played both host and opening comedian, taking the stage in a short, tight black dress and red heels with a wine glass in one hand while delivering a 20-minute set mixing introductory remarks and jokes. “I’m a single mom, too,” she said early on. “That’s why I’m dressed like a slutty babysitter.”

Matthew Gill — a recently divorced Chicago native — took the stage next for a quick 12-minute set, joking that his ex-wife had had an “emotional affair” before adding that “the thing about an ‘emotional affair’” was that it included sex. Gill touched on moving back to Chicago after his divorce and explored various types of relationships through time, before concluding that, “You need to be a dysfunctional person to be in a functional relationship.”

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“How gorgeous is he?” Traina asked after his set. “Who would want to divorce you?”

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Chicago comic Liz Stockwell — celebrating her “one year anniversary of divorce” — came up next, with a 12-minute set talking about her current dating habits, her family history and a brief discussion of her ex-husband. “I was divorced two days after Christmas,” she said happily. “Best gift I ever gave myself.”

The structure of the show at this point — a host and two comedians, all circling around the topic of divorce, while hitting on other tangentially related relationship fodder — worked pretty well as a facilitation tool for a thematic comedy gimmick. In fact, it's a fitting set-up for any subject-specific stand-up show to follow, providing easy transitions between comedians and giving a throughline for a variety of comics to carry through the night.

But the introduction of Traina's third guest — Los Angeles-based comedian Doug Bass — also introduced a brief improvisational interlude to the show where Traina and Bass took argument suggestions from the audience and then improvised one minute arguments. This section — and a later interactive section where audience members wrote down something they would like to say to an ex and then Traina and Bass incorporated those phrases into improvised scenes — were the roughest of the night, throwing off the stand-up groove and not delivering many laughs in the process. These sections could be shortened or removed completely and replaced with an additional comic or two giving more perspective on their failed relationships.

Bass — an odd fit as the “only married comic up here” — gave a solid 18-minute set

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A good premise and a smart way to show focus on a single topic, “Divorce Diaries” works best when comedians are opening up about their own relationship experiences, divorced or not. At the end of the night Traina thanked the audience for coming and noted in parting, “The point is to heal through laughter.”

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*“Divorce Diaries” continues 8 p.m. Wednesday at Zanies, 1548 N. Wells St., 312-337-4027 and [www.zanies.com/chicago](http://www.zanies.com/chicago)*

*Zach Freeman is a freelance writer.*

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## Zach Freeman



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Freelance comedy contributor Zach Freeman has degrees in the extremely related fields of theater and computer science. He has written about theater and comedy in Chicago for more than a decade, contributing to Centerstage Chicago, USA Today's GoEscape magazine, and Newcity, where he was also the theater editor for several years. He is an instructor in the masters program in computer science at the University of Chicago where he teaches a very funny class about databases.

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