

MRT season off to a roaring start with 'The Lion'

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

I'm not the first girl to fall in love with Benjamin Scheuer, and I surely won't be the last.

Scheuer shares himself in such an honest, open way during his one-man show "The Lion" – the season opener for Merrimack Repertory Theatre – you cannot help but feel connected to him right away. He walks onto a stage set with only a few chairs and seven guitars, with a big, boyish grin on his gentle face. And he has us.

MRT's new artistic director Sean Daniels helms this show, and he's scored a home run at his first at-bat. Choosing this intimate show, which has already scored the 2015 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Solo Performance and several other accolades, was a wonderful way to start his tenure at a theater company that already has a solid reputation for stellar performances.

Scheuer – or Ben, as we audience members immediately feel an intimate acquaintance with him – tells the story of his young life through songs played on a variety of acoustics (some vintage Martins, a Les Paul and couple Froggy Bottoms) and one electric guitar. He tells us "music is where I find my greatest joy," and he begins and ends the show thanking his father for introducing him to it. But his



COURTESY PHOTO

Benjamin Scheuer.

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'The Lion'

WHEN: Through Sept. 20. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theater, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$23-\$60. Student, military and group discounts available.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org and online at bit.ly/1KXC0cf. For more information, visit mrt.org.

relationship with his father wasn't perfect, as most can relate. There are unresolved issues that haunt Ben into adulthood, as he deals with love, loss, career, family and serious health concerns.

There are many touches directorially and with staging and lighting that add to the power of the show. Scheuer sings as himself for the most part, in the center chair; when he's singing as his father, he uses another specific chair, and when he's angrily rocking out on his electric, it's another. It's a simple vehicle to delineate the moods and perspectives of his journey. Another indicative action he takes is the casual sloughing off of his apparel through the tight, 80-minute show – suit jacket, loosening of the tie, eventually the shoes are off – as Scheuer reveals himself figuratively and literally to us. Also noteworthy is the hanging circle of vintage lights above the stage, that change color and fade to dramatic effect as applicable songs and plot turns occur.

Scheuer's lyrics are incredible; they're touching, cleverly rhymed (who else has linked "unfatten" and "Manhattan," I ask you?) and presented in a smooth,

Benjamin Scheuer performs his one-man show "The Lion" at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., through Sept. 20.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MATTHEW MURPHY

rapid-fire way that not only tells the story, but are entertaining songs that stand on their own. In fact, they will, as Scheuer is working on recording an album with the songs of "The Lion." His guitar work is terrific; it's at once folksy and digitally acrobatic, and he's just as at home when he's fuzzing out his electric. He voice runs up and down the scales, at times quiet and low, sometimes loud, raspy and powerful.

It's important to me as a reviewer not to give away storylines, as I think it's a better audience experience to discover it for yourself, in the moment. Suffice it to say Scheuer takes us on his personal journey through love, pain and triumph, and we hang on his every word and note, and melt with his every genuine smile. There are moments of joy, lots of humor and some dark intensity. The leitmotif of "The Lion" is the title itself, and "what makes a lion a lion." As Scheuer sings "sometimes being brave means being scared," and no one can deny his absolute bravery in presenting himself in such an exposed, personal way. His song "Cookie-Tin Banjo" will make your heart ache.

There is nothing more beautiful than when someone is their authentic, naked self. And Scheuer's talents as a musician and storyteller are brilliant.

Do not miss "The Lion." Go and fall in love with Ben yourself.

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