

THEATER REVIEWS

Bertels beams in her one-woman show, 'My 80-year-old Boyfriend'

By SHEILA BARTH barths@comcast.net

She's vibrant, versatile. Broadway star Charissa Bertels shines at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in her one-act, one-woman show, "My 80-year-old Boyfriend."

Bertels got her Broadway start performing in "A Christmas Story," which she exuberantly benchmarks at Merrimack Rep. Recently, she toured nationally in musical "If/Then."

Bertels conceived "My 80-year-old Boyfriend," around 2010, and enlisted friends Christian Duhamel to write the book and lyrics, and Edward Bell, who also penned lyrics and composed the music.

Nicely accompanied by ac-

complished pianist Kevin David Thomas on stage, Bertels can belt out big tunes, her lovely voice booming to the rafters. She tap-dances, twists, turns, and cartwheels across the stage like a competitive high school cheerleader, yet breathlessly spins a fun story about meeting her 80-year-old friend-companion, Milton, in 2010.

Superficially, Milton appears to be a nice, friendly older gent with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, but turns out to be a highly cultured, well-connected, philanthropic millionaire.

"He's not my boyfriend in THAT sense," she says. I'm no Anna Nicole Smith."

As Bertels switches from her ingenue persona to her portrayal of Milton, her posture and voice

change. She becomes that bent-over, opinionated, raspy-voiced, spritely octogenarian.

At times, the pretty redhead is overly exuberant, but that's okay. Theatergoers on opening day applauded loudly - and often - during her frenetic performance.

Bertels allows no lag time, not stopping to change her costumes (kudos, designer Gregory A. Poplyk). She dons a shirt, a skirt, and other clothing and accessories on stage, or briefly steps off-stage one time, transforming from street clothing to a rhinestone-edged teal gown, her long hair elegantly swept up.

Bertels claims her story is based on her real-life friendship with a man named Milton. (no last name), who was many

years her senior. After awhile, we sense their blooming relationship is more symbiotic. He affectionately refers to her as "My little bird" when they're eating lunch at his favorite Texas Barbecue restaurant, during visits at his home, etc. She earned prolonged applause for her self-duet, "When I'm Together With You."

Looking out the luxurious, high-rise apartment's two huge windows, she's dazzled by the spectacular skyline. "What A View!" she sings..

Charissa is a struggling young actress, racing from one audition to another, determined to make it to Broadway on her own talent. To supplement her meager income, she sells an energy drink, Monkey juice, in a

BOX OFFICE

One-act, 100-minute, one-woman musical comedy starring Broadway singer-actress Charissa Bertels, directed by Merrimack Repertory Theatre Artistic Director Sean Daniels, through May 21, at Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell. \$26-\$70. mrt.org, 978-654-4678.

mall, and must meet her daily quota of sales. That's where she meets Milton.

Turns out, Milton is divorced, but worships and adores his ex-wife, Diane, whose portraits are ubiquitous throughout his home. He also has a daughter with whom he's estranged, but we don't know why. Somehow, we think Milton doesn't, either. And Charissa's dad? "I'm more Carnegie Hall, he's more beer halls," she cracks.

More than anything, Charissa

wants her dad to appreciate her talent, but he remains distant, emotionally and geographically.

As Charissa and Milton's relationship grows, they help each other face truths about themselves and their families. They also learn they've built a loving, lasting, caring relationship that has enriched their lives.

Besides showcasing Bertels' talent, she make us smile, laugh and exult with her, sharing the power of love and caring in our lives.

Stoneham Theatre's 'Gabriel' - a heart stopping mystery

By SHEILA BARTH barths@comcast.net

Powerful acting catapults Stoneham Theatre's pulse-beating production of Moira Buffini's intriguing drama, "Gabriel," keeping theatergoers on the edge of their seats throughout the two-act, two-hour play. Stoneham Artistic Director Weylin Symes, who meticulously directs this New England premiere production, says he waited five years to do it. The time seemed right to do it now, he adds, and he couldn't be more correct.

Matthew Lazure's historically accurate, two-tiered set and Gail Astrid Buckley's costumes catapult us back to remote English Guernsey Island in the 1930s, while David Reiffel's battery of sounds and Jeffrey E. Salzberg's lighting punctuate each scene.

Hitler's troops have success-

fully led a bloodless takeover of the region, without firing a shot. Nazi Officer Von Pfunz, in charge of the troops, has seized the best house on the island for himself, forcing widow Jeanne Becquet and her 10-year-old daughter Estelle to live in their rustic cottage. Award-winning actress Georgia Lyman portrays haughty homeowner Jeanne Becquet, who cringes at Von Pfunz's sexual advancements, and his loathing presence. He's short, bald, ugly, and downright disgusting, she tells him. Thomas Derrah, actor extraordinaire who always delivers a superlative performance, doesn't disappoint here. The versatile actor makes us hate him, despise him. Von Pfunz isn't the typical, evil Nazi officer generally portrayed in vintage World War II stories, plays and films. Initially,

he pretends to be gross, devoid of culture and couth. During their initial exchange, Jeanne mistakenly thinks he doesn't understand a word of English, as she sarcastically hurls one insult after another at him, cleverly smiling to mask her hatred. When Von Pfunz suddenly responds to her in perfect English, conveying his educational background that includes his attending Oxford University, she's stunned. Jeanne has much bigger problems, though. Her husband is dead. She thinks her son, a British pilot, was shot down and killed. Her daughter-in-law Lillian (tenderly portrayed by Josephine Moshiri Elwood) who was married to Jeanne's son for a few months before he left to fight in the war, is Jewish. There's no doubt that Von Pfunz is an active, integral part of the political anti-Jewish ma-

chine to rid Europe of all Jews. There's another wrinkle, too. Jeanne's 10-year-old, spirited daughter, Estelle, has set up a "ritual" section on the floor, invoking God through prayer, hoping to protect her brother.

However, one night, Estelle bursts through the door, hollering for help. She discovered a naked man washed up on the beach who's alive - barely - but unconscious, and with help, she drags him to her cottage.

He has no identity, no papers. He could be an Ally or enemy. But he's a human being, whose life is worth saving, she cries. The play rolls into dramatic high gear. Jeanne's afraid of harboring him, yet she, Lillian and Estelle notice a remarkable similarity between this stranger and her son, whom Estelle named Gabriel. When Gabriel regains consciousness, he has no memory. He has stumbled downstairs during one of Von Pfunz's frequent, unwanted, unannounced visits, so Jeanne scrambles to

BOX OFFICE

Stoneham Artistic Director Weylin Symes directs Moira Buffini's intriguing play, "Gabriel," through May 14, 395 Main St., Stoneham. tickets, \$45-\$50;seniors, \$40-\$45; students with valid ID, \$20. stonehamtheatre.org, 781-279-2200.

make excuses for him. Suddenly, Gabriel, who speaks English, converses with the officer in perfect German, the two exchanging lines of poetry. Is Gabriel English? Is he German? Is he neither? Actor Alexander Molina is ideally cast as the cultured, tormented amnesiac young man. Telling Von Pfunz that Gabriel is her nephew who has been very ill, Jeanne and her bustling housekeeper, Lake (terrific Cheryl McMahon), try desperately to seek information about him.

Estelle, (wonderfully portrayed by 9-year-old rising star Marissa Simeqi) continues to nurture Gabriel, forging a sweet friendship, while defying Von Pfunz, who claims he wants to be her friend. And Lillian? She's at a dangerous crossroads. What to

do? She's in love with Gabriel, regardless of his identity. Non-stop layers of mystery, intrigue, and suspense keep theatergoers' attention riveted to the stage. The pace quickens. Incident after incident, taking on heightened meaning. As Jeanne and Estelle become increasingly defiant, Von Pfunz reveals a softer, sensitive side of himself. He wants to be loved, but his outward need for affection doesn't mask his demonic, dark side.

And Gabriel? Who is he - really? What's his future? Where will he go? Without warning, he plot takes a shocking twist. This production is so fine-tuned and realistic, you won't want to miss it. You'll be talking about it long after you leave the theater.

Crossword Puzzle

- ACROSS
1 Tracy/Hepburn comedy
9 Turned on a pivot
15 Musical half step
16 Luxor or Mirage, e.g.
17 Clotting promoter
18 Bridge over the Grand Canal
19 Vocational identifier
20 High peak
21 S-due mail
22 Top
23 Be obligated
24 Laurie of "Roseanne"
26 "Sliver" author Levin
27 Painter using crude strokes
29 Set free
31 Faux pas
32 Commands
33 Fewer
34 Pungent
35 Fat
39 Preserved one way
41 Kitchen gadget
42 Nineveh resident
45 Finger Lake
46 London lav.
47 Specify
49 Hold up
50 Can material
51 Half and half?
52 Cow's chew
53 Storage container
54 Saudi
56 Terrier type
58 Smart comeback
59 Conceals
60 Navy construction worker
61 Laundry workers

Grid for crossword puzzle with numbers 1-61.

- 13 Complete
14 Thingamajig
21 Frank
25 On the agenda
28 Overbearing
30 Country singer K.T.
32 Anti-knock number
34 Disaffect
36 Vex
37 Backpedaler of a sort
38 Dreary condition
40 Ornate wardrobe
41 Gives what is due
42 Tabernacle tables
43 Evening affair
44 Musical composition
45 Origin
48 More aloof
55 Fisherman's float

Barbecue

By SHEILA BARTH barths@comcast.net

Don't expect me to reveal too much here about multi-award winning playwright Robert O'Hara's two-act satire, "Barbecue". Lyric Stage Company of Boston was very strict about spoiler alerts. The ushers weren't allowed to issue programs until after intermission and the second act started.

I can reveal that director extraordinaire Summer L. Williams helmed a Boston star-studded cast, whose performance was well worth seeing. What's it all about? Robert O'Hara's caustic comedy that appeared through May 7 is about a family, the O'Mallerys. They've gathered for a simulated picnic in their local park to mount an intervention for their sister, Barbara, whom they refer to as Zippety Boom.Collective-

ly, they're no angels, either.

There's also a counterpart African-American family mirroring the O'Mallerys. Both families are typical profanity-spewing, trailer trash types with individual addictions, bent on a mission - or two. Their collective goal could require individual sacrifices, but may result in an amazing reward. Beneath all this wackiness is a serious underpinning of substance abuse treatment and racism. The cast portrayed a menagerie of colorful characters- a real hoot.Garbed in Tyler Kinney's telltale costumes, each actor nailed down his/her character's personality. Adrienne Krstansky and Jasmine Rush portrayed older sister Lillie Anne; Sarah Elizabeth Bedard and Jackie Davis portrayed Marie; Christine Power and Lyndsay Allyn Cox portrayed Adlean; Bryan T. Donovan and James R. Milord, were

younger brother James T; and Deb Martin and Ramona Lisa Alexander portrayed Barbara. The group gathered in designer Jessica Pizzuti's scenic landscaped park, near the pavilion, joking, swiping, planning, poking fun, swapping family anecdotes and memories. while waiting for prodigal sister Barbara to arrive. "We ain't no god-damned normal family, and we ain't never been no god-damned normal family," James T. spouted. The second act opened with a surprising twist and included an offer and ultimatum that seemed too good to resist. As the play progressed, it became funnier and more startling. Although "Barbecue" is gone now, I still won't spoil the fun by telling you any more, or revealing the razzle-dazzle ending.

Real Estate Transfers

Table with 4 columns: BUYER 1, SELLER 1, ADDRESS, PRICE. Lists real estate transactions.

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