

Bertels shines in 'My 80-Year-Old Boyfriend' at MRT

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

Charissa Bertels is nothing short of phenomenal.

Her one-woman show, "My 80-Year-Old Boyfriend," is the spectacular season ender for Merrimack Repertory Theatre. And it's not hyperbole to call it a tour de force of multidisciplinary theatrical talent and awe-inspiring work by this amazing actor.

Bertels shares her own true story of being a struggling New York City actor (yes, professionals lose the gender specificity) who follows her cheerfully relentless schedule of waking up at 4:30 a.m., going to auditions, plodding through her "survival job" (we've all had them) hawking juice and starting all over the next day, waiting for that elusive big break on Broadway. Through original songs (collaborating with Bertels on book and lyrics was Christian Duhamel, with music and lyrics by Edward Bell) that vary from rousing to heart-wrenching, Bertels tells her tale with humor and every emotion she can wring out of herself – and us.

Central to the play is her relationship with Milton – an 80-something millionaire whom she meets while working her day job. Their friendship is "unlikely," to say the least. But as Bertels allows herself to release her confusion and youthful cynicism at their connection, their relationship grows. And so does she.

Their story is beautiful, and worth telling and seeing. But it's how it's told that makes this show a don't-miss. I watched the

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'My 80-Year-Old Boyfriend'

WHEN: Through May 21. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donahue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$26-\$70. Senior, student, military and group discounts available.

TICKETS: Call 1-978-654-4678 or online at bit.ly/2oPsPo3.

INFORMATION: www.mrt.org.

audience while I watched the show, and they already loved her by the time Bertels had powered through the rousing intro song, "By The Numbers." She is a "soprano belter," to be sure. But it's not just showy vocal theatrics; there is nuance and feeling behind every

note. The evocative lyrics will get you, too. Yes, you'll likely cry during "What a View" and "Fifth Grade Feeling," as I did (and most folks around me). But it's so worth it.

What puts this show over the top and makes it not just a terrific exhibition of Broadway-style talent – singing, dancing, acting, a tap number, piano playing and even singing in German – is Bertels' incredible portrayal of Milton. She bounces back and forth between talking to us as herself, and sprinkling in conversations as Milton, in a hilarious, astounding way. Her grizzled vocal styling

for him falls somewhere between George Burns and Jimmy Durante, and comes with a physicality change that differentiates him easily. There is an even a head-shakingly amazing duet she does – with herself. I couldn't even get annoyed when after the thunderous applause died down, an audience member exclaimed in the silence, "She is excellent!" Because ... wow, she really is.

There are so many great moments in this story that I will leave you to discover in person; there are sudden outbursts of laughter (mostly at something Milton says), there are tears, there are epiphanies, there are struggles, there are life lessons. Bertels tackles them all deftly.

I would recommend to all my actor friends that this is a show worth your time and money. Bertels fires on all cylinders; the fact that this is her true story and an original book is yet another layer of the talent encompassed in



Photos courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

Charissa Bertels is shown channeling her elderly friend Milton, above, and below, working her "survival job" and dealing with Milton by phone, in her original show "My 80-Year-Old Boyfriend," through May 21 at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass.

it. This is a master class in how to put on a show worth seeing.

But there is surely no one who wouldn't enjoy

this absolutely lovely story of a beautiful friendship, presented with humor, love and Broadway-level entertainment.

Please do not miss it.

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THEATER REVIEW

