

## Shirley Valentne: A great awakening

By Barbara Vitello | Daily Herald Critic at Large

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Steel Beam Theatre patrons don't often see founder and artistic director Donna Steele on stage. Usually they'll find her in the box office selling tickets before the show or passing out soft drinks at intermission.

But Steele is as comfortable in front of the footlights as she is at the front of the house. For proof, look no further than her wistful, moving performance as a discontented British housewife in Steel Beam's production of "Shirley Valentine."

Steele is warm and endearing in Willy Russell's gentle coming-of-middle-age tale about a woman reclaiming her spirit and recapturing the boldness of her youth.

The one-woman play unfolds as a series of monologues by the droll, self-aware Shirley, most of which she directs toward the kitchen wall. They consist of youthful recollections, quirky encounters with friends and neighbors and anecdotes about her husband and children.

They all point to a woman -- her kids grown and her marriage stagnating -- who desperately wants to reorder her life: to live fearlessly and fully, to "drink wine in a country where they grow the grape." A friend's invitation to spend two weeks in Greece gives her that opportunity. To reveal more would ruin the ending. Suffice to say, the spirit isn't the only thing Greece awakens in her.

The play, which takes place primarily in designer Tavia DeFelice's modest, middle class kitchen, benefits from Terry Domschke's light, unobtrusive direction. But this is really Steele's show. Her performance makes it worth seeing.

She plays Shirley with a resigned smile and a make-the-best-of-it attitude underscored with a tinge of regret, but no reproach. Shirley's marriage may have grown dull, but that's not entirely her husband's fault. She recognizes her fears have landed her where she is: stuck in her kitchen, talking to the wall.

Her problem isn't an unexamined life, it's an unused life.

"I allowed myself to live a little life when inside me there was so much more," she says, echoing the sentiments of anyone who has ever dreamed of something more but settled for less.

### "Shirley Valentine"

Three stars out of four

Location: Steel Beam Theatre, 111 W. Main St., St. Charles

Times: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 10

Running time: About 2 hours, including intermission

Parking: On the street

Tickets: \$22-\$25

Box office: (630) 587-8521 or [www.steelbeamtheatre.com](http://www.steelbeamtheatre.com)

Rating: For adults, includes sexual content, strong language