

Giving a tip of the red hats for spunky 'Shirley Valentine'

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By Jim Edwards Special to the beacon news

Opening night for Shirley Valentine was quite an affair, complete with champagne and pastries served at the end of the play.

I arrived early enough to catch the arrival of 14 members of the Red Hat Society from the Cary/Crystal Lake area, full of spunk from wining and dining next door at a Mexican restaurant.

As the last member of this crew danced their way into the theatre with the last in line singing Just in Time, I knew that Donna Steele would have a most receptive house for her first go at this delightful comedy.

Shirley Valentine was commissioned for the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool in 1986 but it quickly made its way to London and moved in 1989 to the Booth Theatre, where it ran for 324 performances. Ellen Burstyn and Loretta Swit have played Shirley in this one-woman tour de force.

What's it all about? It's about that it's never too late to learn to love yourself. At 42, Shirley Valentine is tied down in a marriage that has lost all its sparkle. Shirley spills out her innermost frustrations to the wall in her kitchen.

What she is actually doing is talking to the audience, all quite willing to share in her frustrations.

Shirley is ready to be reborn, and she gets a chance when her best friend wins a trip-for-two to Greece and invites her to come along. While in Greece, Shirley discovers romance and new sense of worth. Shirley Valentine is a one woman version of the movie Thelma and Louise -- but with a happy ending.

If you missed seeing the 1989 Shirley Valentine movie, by all means after you see Steele as Shirley, rent a copy. You will see in the flesh characters who are only referred to on stage.

Most of all, Shirley Valentine is a barrel of laughs, and includes quite a few words for which your grandmother would have washed your mouth out with soap if she heard you say. Some words that are spoken your grandmother would not have even known about. But all these naughty references seem a natural part of Shirley's view of her "small" world and life.

In order for Shirley Valentine to work, an actor has to master a lower class "English" accent keeping her monologue seamless and yet allowing the audience to laugh their heads off about every 3 or 4 minutes. At the end of this two-act play, the Red Hat Society ladies roared their approval. After all, Shirley Valentine in spirit and action is a young Red Hatter!

Steele is one of those actors that all they have to do to make you love their character is smile a most charismatic smile. Steele makes you love and cherish Shirley Valentine and believe in her emotional issues, and that, ladies and gentlemen, makes for a very special night of theater.

Along the way, the playwright gives his work nonstop humor when you experience Shirley Valentine's thoughts on assortment of things: a bloodhound vegetarian dog, sex, marriage, Freud, sex, a nativity play, Catholic school, sex, and why "marriage is like the Middle East".

In the end Shirley gets her paradise in the sun, which we too in the audience long so much for but never dare go for. Shirley Valentine is very much at this time of the year valentines treat for couples to experience.