

'Shirley Valentine' takes audience in journey of self-discovery

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By Renee Tomell
St. Charles Republican
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St. Charles, IL -

Donna Steele will be alone on stage, but not the only character in the one-woman show "Shirley Valentine."

The play opens with Shirley (Valentine) Bradshaw, a British housewife, reevaluating her life as she talks to the kitchen wall while preparing her husband's evening meal. Her children grown and husband unappreciative, she soon jumps at the chance to join a girlfriend who has won a trip to Greece for two. It proves the catalyst for reclaiming the personal identity and romantic passion she had as a young Shirley Valentine.

"Donna has to create the reality of the husband, the reality of the people she meets in Greece, of her friends and neighbors," said director Terence Domschke, artistic director of the award-winning Janus Theatre in Elgin (www.janustheatre.org). "Each one is done with a slightly different Greek and English dialect or accent. It's a joy for me to see an actress who selects a challenge and works hard to fulfill it."

Steele calls the play funny, touchingly honest and thought-provoking. It was written by Willy Russell ("Educating Rita").

"It's the ultimate in make-believe when you get to use somebody's else's voice," Steele said. "I could relate to her very well — she's a wife and a mother. The only thing she's lacking is career drive. She had dreams of a career long ago and never had the chance."

Domschke lauds the strong writing in "Shirley Valentine."

"The script is worthy," he said. "That's why I like to work with the classics (at Janus). They address the human condition. With farces, you can get so bored. When we're doing this type of show, you learn something with the encounter of the play every night."

Steele suggested he direct the piece following their collaboration last season on "Same Time, Next Year." Domschke said he initially was skeptical of the show when he first skimmed the dialogue, thinking "Shirley Valentine" was limited to being "kind of a woman's piece."

"Then, as I got into the play and really started studying it, I found out it was more universal than that; it's about the loss of potential in people's lives," he said, explaining that when a friend of Shirley's tries to blame men in general for women's dissatisfaction, Shirley reflects on her husband, Joe —"It's not that. I notice he is at the same place I am. He has all this unused life."

Domschke savors the insight of the expression "unused life."

"He has atrophied and she has atrophied," he said. "I found the play was a wonderful statement of human stagnation. And suddenly, something comes to jolt one out of that state." The trigger for Shirley is the trip to Greece.

Steele is a fan of Domschke's directing style.

"He's a fabulous director; he gets in all the meaning and depth of emotions," she said. "He's such a details director. I'm learning so much."

She first met Domschke when her daughter, Amy, attended theater courses at Elgin Community College, where he was longtime head of the department.

Domschke said the intimate size of Steel Beam Theatre is especially suited to the show.

"This play has such an intensely personal message," he said. "Sometimes, it's more powerful to have the performer right with you for that. With a one-person show, that makes it almost as if you're the other actor responding to this, (as if you're) sitting down to tea or coffee with a woman exposing her whole life."

Slipping easily into one of her British accents, Steele said the show contains a "wee bit of language," but is by no means R-rated.

Domschke recommends the play for "anybody struggling to fulfill a potential in their lives."

If you go

What Steel Beam Theatre in St. Charles presents "Shirley Valentine," starring Donna Steele in this one-woman show directed by Terence Domschke.

When Opening night is at 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 11, followed by performances at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 10.

Where Steel Beam Theatre, 111 W. Main St., St. Charles.

Tickets Reservations are available through the Web site at www.SteelBeamTheatre.com or by calling (630) 587-8521. The theater also offers group rates and dinner packages.

Television writer wooed into cast of 'Love Letters'

After "Shirley Valentine," more theater fun is on the horizon at Steel Beam Theatre.

Actor and Emmy-winning writer Richard Culliton (he and wife Carolyn are veteran writers for daytime dramas in New York) will take the stage with Artistic Director Donna Steele in the show "Love Letters" opening on Valentine's Day and playing Thursday through Sunday, Feb. 14 to 17. Funny and touching, the theater piece is comprised of letters exchanged between two people who grew up together and went their separate ways, but continued to share their intimate confidences over a lifetime.

Steele first met Culliton while both attended the theater department at Northwestern University. This past

summer, she invited him to appear with her in the two-person play, in which the actors read the exchange of letters. The stage reunion is a far cry from the demanding monologue memorization facing Steele in "Shirley Valentine."

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