



CLOTHES MAKE THE WOMAN

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ACTRESSES CHANGE SHOES, OUTFITS AND SOMETIMES THEIR PERSONAS IN PLAYS AT THE OLNEY THEATRE CENTER AND ROUND HOUSE SILVER SPRING

One-woman shows delve into the world of dating and speaking up

With ditzy divorcee Haley Walker closing in on the big 4-0, dating can't be easy. At least, that's what the restaurant manager and mom is learning in "Bad Dates," a one-woman show on stage at the Olney Theatre Center through April 20.

It has been years since Haley (Melissa Phaim), recently moved from Texas to New York with her young daughter, has dated. In her bedroom amid 600 shoeboxes and a plethora of shimmery dresses, skirts and shirts, she is getting ready for the big night. She dismissed the short black skirt and silver top she tries on first as more trollop than tasteful. Next, she wiggles her way into a beige spanx, a beloved 21st century version of a girdle that blessedly smoothes out some of the lumps and bumps. Shoes are rapidly stuffed on and yanked off, each pair accompanied by another tale, mostly related to her Texas days. Haley finally comes up with the perfect outfit.

Upon her return from this evening out, the audience learns the first words out of her suitor's mouth were "You look old". And so it goes, for some 100 minutes, as viewers learn the ins and outs of Jimmy choo and Channel shoes, the Romanian mafia and Buddhism—Hampton's-style.

Meanwhile over at Round House Theatre in Silver Spring, Kate Campbell Stevenson also pans to dress and undress on



Kate Campbell Stevenson transforms herself into a shy Eleanor Roosevelt as she changes into a powerful force.

stage as she presents her one-woman show on Friday and Saturday. Written as well as performed by the actress, Stevenson is known for what she calls “motivational theater,” and “portraying dead women from history.” For this event, she will take on Eleanor Roosevelt and a group of pioneering women at a Wyoming Town meeting. She says her goal is to make “women’s history everyone’s history.”



Kate Campbell Stevenson portrays Rose Crabtree who ran against her husband for Jackson Hole town council and won. The other "women" are Mayor Grace Miller and Sheriff Pearl Williams. The women won the first election in 1920 by a 2 to 1 ratio and were re-elected in the next election by a 3 to 1 vote, even though in the state of Wyoming women were outnumbered by men 10 to 1.

Stevenson begins by grabbing a big flowery hat from a coat stand and pumping up the audience with a song. She continues by morphing into a historical figure. Today it is Eleanor Roosevelt: step by step she transforms herself, slipping into a flowery dress with a huge lace collar, applying makeup, then adding a wig and what the performer describes as Eleanor’s “awful teeth.”

The fourth wall between the audience and the actor emerges and Stevenson believes she has “channeled” Eleanor. Instead of the confident elderly stateswoman so familiar with archival news footage, she is a fearful 36-year-old mother of five who has a philandering husband recently afflicted with polio. Asked to speak on her husband’s behalf, Eleanor is terrified, especially since—when nervous—she sounds a bit like an overwrought screech owl. During the 10-minute vignette, Stevenson does a remarkable job of transforming Eleanor from a nervous but lovable nebbish to a likable yet extremely impressive decision maker.

In Stevenson’s recent performance at HUD, many audience members were impressed by the actress’ capacity to transform seamlessly from one character to another. After the performance, standing in the elevator on the way to their jobs, some admitted to getting teary as they watched Stevenson make the characters “believable.”

Stevenson’s one-hour performance isn’t subtle or filled with nuance. Rather she offers an important message. The seeds of her show began in 1996, when, with 25 years of acting and singing in regional shows, she had a painful epiphany.

“I watched as my daughter became more passive and was holding back.” Stevenson recalls.

Of course she admits, “It didn’t help that Juliana’s mom always sang The Star Spangled Banner” at swim meets—while the child hid in the bathroom. Now, Juliana is a graduate student at Columbia University.

In any case, back then, the gregarious Silver Spring actress saw herself in her daughter, just a few decades earlier, she too, had been afraid to speak up and offer opinions.

I knew I wanted to do something else,” she says, pointing out that it is easy to “look pretty and give an audience some nice entertainment,” but “I wanted to go to another level.”

Stevenson decided to profile important women in history, offering a slice of their lives. The vignettes are heavily message-based, with the performer offering brief sermons before and after each characterization. Since Stevenson is a likeable first-rate actress, she gets away with her up- with-women and occasionally schmaltzy talks.

Initially, the G- rated production was designed for middle-schoolers, but Stevenson soon realized the production would be useful to people of all ages. Since its inception, she has taken it to rural areas and even to the White House. Only last week, the actress performed in New Jersey one day, at the Department of Housing and Urban Development headquarters in the District the next, followed by stops at Montgomery County schools.

Unlike Stevenson, who enjoys the control of performing solo, Phaim admits this one- woman show experience makes her feel “lonely on stage, but it’s a very important exercise for an actress.”

Both actresses complicate their job by dressing while chatting up the audience. No matter the subject, there is something wonderfully voyeuristic about watching people perform such personal acts on stage. While Phaim is occasionally down to her underwear, the actress decided to forego hiring a personal trainer, figuring at 41 and after having a child, she wants the audience to identify with her not envy her.

Stevenson stays fully clothed, simply overlaying outfit upon outfit.. After transforming herself into a Native American, she wipes off the makeup and starts all over again, creating a lipsticked Eleanor. In her vignette about the women’s town council in Wyoming during 1920, she also interacts with some large dolls.

Both manage to offer hope as well as a sense of pride, regardless if they are speaking on behalf of a wayward husband or looking for a knight in shining armor.

“It’s all about hope,” Phaim says.

As Haley explains after a particularly wonderful date, “I felt safe. I didn’t want to ruin it by saying something wrong.”

For “Bad Dates” Director Lee Mikeska Gardner, the play ends with “Haley asking for and accepting help and still being strong.”

As for Stevenson, she hopes “to use the theater experience as an agent of change.”