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Leslie Fitzwater: 'Once More with Feeling'...Piaf

Milwaukee actor sings gutsy cabaret



Local actress/singer Leslie Fitzwater has been captivating Milwaukee audiences for decades. From Jan. 15 through Feb. 10, Skylight Music Theatre (158 N. Broadway) mounts the final run of Fitzwater's original signature work EDITH PIAF ONSTAGE, built on the legendary French chanteuse's gutsy cabaret songs of the 1930s through the early '60s.

Tell me about your history with Edith Piaf's music.

I first sang a Piaf song for Bastille Days in 1987. People liked it so much they told Colin Cabot (who managed the Skylight then) that I should write a show on Piaf. He commissioned me and I performed it the next summer. It was so well attended that it paid for the Skylight's first computer lighting board!

You've performed various incarnations over the years at Bastille Days and the smaller stages at the Skylight?

Yes, and every time I did it, it got a little bit harder to bring it back up to speed.

Why was that?

I started having severe vocal problems. When I first auditioned for Colin I could sing high Fs. As I got older, I started losing high notes. Ear, nose and throat specialists have said there's damage to my laryngeal nerves, probably from a high fever in childhood. If I have a very long vocal line, I can't immediately get a breath in.

That must be hard for you.

I miss my high notes. But it's also a wonderful adventure. I go back to basics: How am I breathing? How am I pronouncing words? The same steps I take my students through... I think my technique is actually stronger than ever. When Bill Theisen [the current Skylight artistic director] called me to do the show again, he gave me the only scenario where I could possibly say yes.

What was that?

The venue. The main stage at the Skylight.

Piaf was originally planned for last season and had to be rescheduled.

Yes. Bill was so gracious in postponing it for exactly a year. I was diagnosed with colon cancer. I'm doing well and my tests are all coming out clear. I feel great.

What are your connections and disconnects with Edith Piaf?

The obvious areas of disconnect are her abject poverty—she was lucky to survive to adulthood. Also with her being an alcoholic and addicted to drugs. Where I truly connect with Piaf is the way she approached songs. She put her entire self into them and did it better than anyone. She sang "Chansons Réalistes," songs about the lives of people in the cabarets. People really understood them. Like when a country singer gets up and sings some desperate song—it's the same emotional connection.

You've said this is the last time you'll perform Piaf. Is it hard approaching it knowing that?

I can't carry that; it would be too great a weight on my heart. No, I'm pretty in the moment. I do one thing at a time. I'm feeling like a kid in a candy shop.

photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express

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