

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

STAGE REVIEW

Touring Piaf show a fantastic theatrical treat in all ways

Top-calibre production continues

Aug. 12 to 16

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The iconic pint-sized Edith Piaf burned through life with a passion and fatalistic verve that ordinary people cannot comprehend.

In *Piaf: Love Conquers All*, running at ArtSpring through Aug. 16, Naomi Emmerson portrays Piaf in a script by Roger Peace, a Québec-based director/playwright/actor/producer, compelling the audience to understand a woman who chose to live on the precipice of genius and self-destruction.

Using 14 French songs that flow naturalistically into the dramatic scenes in between, Emmerson has created a world that invites her audience in with a warmth and skill honed from a show that she has been doing since 2005. Originating at the Toronto Fringe Festival, with an off-Broadway run and then touring through the U.S., Philippines and Canada, this latest run of Vancouver, Salt Spring Island and Sidney should send you racing down to the ArtSpring ticket centre to buy a ticket.

Peace weaves this one-woman show, with skillful pianist Yan Li offering some dramatic counterpoint, around the premise that what drove Piaf in her life was her music and her quest for love. Not a comfortable build-a-family, assume-a-mortgage kind of love, but a love that is heart-stoppingly desperate in its passion. That, and a compulsion to create a song in performance that propels Emmerson as Piaf to declare: "I would die if I couldn't sing," is the premise that Peace has created.

Moving chronologically through her life, recalling her childhood in abject poverty then as a street singer in Paris, her rise to fame globally, the death by plane crash of her one true love — married French boxer Marcel Cerdan — and in the second act her descent into morphine and alcohol addiction as a means to pain relief after three near-fatal car acci-



PHOTO BY LARRY ALJERBACH

Naomi Emmerson in *Piaf: Love Conquers All*.

dents, Peace gives us the major points of her life.

It is Emmerson's masterful performance, however, that makes us lose ourselves in Piaf's worldview. Very quickly we forget that this is the story of the great Edith Piaf and we empathize with her as a woman who survives with joy and determination while squeezing the utmost out of life.

Dressed in her characteristic black dress that changes as she ages, Emmerson's first act draws you in, but it is in the second where she transforms into an old woman crippled with arthritis and riddled with addiction that we truly see her chops as an actor.

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In the second act, a recording of Piaf and her last husband Theo Sarapo, 20 years her junior, is overlapped with Emmerson's own rendition. Without seeming like an imitation, Emmerson's voice flows seamlessly, pointing to her expertise and flawless research.

Off-kilter sets and props, in black and white with splashes of red accenting, created to look like a Cocteau drawing, were designed by Emmerson and constructed by her father, Salt Springer Derek Emmerson. They join with a lighting design by Dominic Manca to create clever stagecraft that supports the performance brilliantly.

Besides the entertainment value of a touring show of this calibre, *Piaf: Love Conquers All* makes you look at what you would die for. Leave the theatre and say to yourself, "I would die if I couldn't . . . ?" Consider what you would fill in the blanks with.

Note: this production starts at 7 p.m.