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## Love, Loss and What I Wore: Awesome women, funny stories

Love, Loss and What I Wore is a show that wears well and leaves a pleasant glow.



Mary Walsh, left, Louise Pitre, Andrea Martin, Paula Brancati and Sharron Matthews in Love, Loss, and What I Wore. (CYLLA VON TIEDEMANN PHOTO)

By **RICHARD OUZOUNIAN** Theatre Critic

Wed., July 21, 2010

### Love, Loss, and What I Wore

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Nora and Delia Ephron. Directed by Karen Carpenter. Until Sept. 4 at the Panasonic Theatre, 651 Yonge St.

**416-872-1212**

Clothes may make the man, but they define the woman.

That's just one of the truths you'll take home with you from the often hilarious, often touching, always enjoyable show called *Love, Loss and What I Wore* that opened at the Panasonic Theatre on Wednesday night.

It all began with a woman named Ilene Beckerman who decided to tell her life history in terms of the various clothing she had worn at key moments in her life. She drew pictures of the dresses, wrote down the stories and put them into a book.

Her tale is a charming one, just tart enough to be different, but sweet enough to be familiar, and Louise Pitre is the one who delivers it on and off during the evening, with her familiar knowing smile and instant ability to access emotion making her the perfect narrator.

But it doesn't end there, because Nora and Delia Ephron took Beckerman's original work and used it as the jumping-off point for a witty and wise examination of how a woman's wardrobe serves as the way she remembers her life.

There are four other equally awesome actresses sharing the stage with Pitre, who deliver a whole antiphonal series of choruses about the role of different items of clothing in their lives: the sweater, the prom gown, the high heels, the wedding dress.

And there's also a series of individual stories that run the gamut of ages, classes and types of sexuality.

None of the women move from their stools, where they refer occasionally to the scripts on their music stands. It's not a stilted reading, but a full performance, placed in a format that allows the material to stand out.

Andrea Martin is front and centre, using both her well-known comic skills to make a monologue about buying the perfect bag come to hilarious life. Her lock-jawed imitation of a friend who spends close to \$6,000 on a “Grace Kelly” Hermes satchel, only to have it ruined in the rain, is priceless.

But Martin is also a performer of more subtle skills, as when she turns her speech about the loss of a favourite shirt into an unmistakable parable about the perfect man who got away.

And throughout, it’s sheer delight to see the way Martin can raise one hand and bring down the house with laughter.

Mary Walsh also has a nice commanding presence, not being afraid to confront some of the script’s edgier material, both funny and serious. You haven’t lived until you’ve heard Walsh describe visiting a lover in prison with pants equipped for dalliance courtesy of a hand-designed slit.

But, just like Martin, Walsh is good for more than a good time. She delivers one of the show’s final telling speeches, about how a woman survives a complex mastectomy and reconstruction by concentrating on the wire-cup uplift bra a friend has purchased in advance: the first she’ll ever need in her life.

“I started out with A-minus cups,” her character says, “but I wanted to go all the way to Baywatch.”

Sharron Matthews plays a subtler game, showing us a whole world of characters who aren’t happy with the body they’ve been given and wish that whatever dress they’re wearing came in a different style, a different size, or preferably in black.

She has her finest moment in the sun when she plays a difficult young woman whose well-meaning but interfering mother searches the country for the right wedding dress, ending in a moment that’s as real as it is warm and fuzzy.

Paula Brancati completes the quintet, demonstrating her gift for quiet sarcasm and throwaway humour, flipping us with zinger after zinger about problems with wardrobe.

But she, too, finally turns the tables with a seemingly breezy speech about a girl who was hopelessly, superficially in love with her boots and miniskirts, until one tragic night ended it all. Brancati can switch the mood instantly, and brilliantly.

Is *Love, Loss and What I Wore* terribly profound? No. Its observations are ones that everybody in the audience has noticed or known before.

But they’ve probably forgotten them over the years, which is why it’s good to rediscover that the whole wealth of human experience can be summed up and shared by the communal attitude to a poodle skirt.

It’s a show that wears well and leaves a pleasant glow, but on the way home, my wife suddenly snapped to the realization that no one had coped with one of the truly dark issues.

“Bathing suits,” she said. “They didn’t dare do those.”

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