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Heit moves audience to smiles of recognition, tears

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Sally-Jane Heit

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I don't know whether you've seen her or not, but there's this woman going around on Sanibel claiming to be Sally-Jane Heit. That would be OK, I guess, if she really were (except, of course for the possible identity theft possibilities), but the real Ms. Heit is a distinguished New York singer-actress, a Brooklyn Jew, a seasoned, mature woman who did it all — movies, TV, Broadway — who's also made quite a name for herself in cabaret theatre over the years.

And everyone knows that hypehated girls' names (even some boys' names) are South Carolina/ Georgia/Alabama-rooted, not Brooklyn. I mean. Salluh-Jane???? Give me a break, for God's sake!

The real Ms. Heit put on a one-woman show on Tuesday, Feb. 22, at the Community House on Sanibel that I saw in its trial run a year ago, almost to the day — "Before I Forget... A Memoir with Music." Then it was very much a work-in-progress — she did not want a review, I could not possibly have written one and been at all fair. Last year I could barely see the potential in the show — she may

have known it in her heart and mind — after all, she is indeed Sally-Jane Heit, but I certainly couldn't see it.

This year the show, on the other hand, based on the exact same concept but after extensive re-tooling, re-working — I can't really call it re-writing — was subtle, understated, nuanced and polished, certainly worthy of a full-fledged tour or a 'permanent' slot in a well-known venue — probably in the Village, but perhaps in some other similar location.

A couple of examples...

After consciously and thoughtfully determining that she didn't really need or want to be continuously at the bedside of her dying longtime lover — they'd been trying to break it off for 11 years — she had been gone for several days... until his son asked that she come back — his father had asked for her and the son needed a shower and some rest. "Sure." She asked the nurse when she got there if someone in a coma could hear. "Sure can."

Heit sat on the bed, pulled him close, and sang the "Rodgers & Hart Songbook" to the dying man — "If you asked me I could write a book..." the story of their lives together and, quite possibly, the tenderest stand-alone scene I've ever seen on a stage. Heit missed the mark last year somehow (although there I did see potential); she sure nailed it this year.

Throughout the show, our protagonist struggles to find out "the meaning of life." She discovers early on (well, fairly early on) it's not to be found in her body parts... she wonders if it has anything to do with the fact that, for her, performing is the same thing breathing is for everyone else... or, what about a brand new baby?... A brand new baby is perfect, she muses ... Is that the meaning of life? perfection?

But, periodically, during the show, we hear the voice of "God:"

YOUR TIME IS ALMOST UP....

"Enough already," Heit shoots back. "Time is not going to leave me alone no matter what..." it is here that the first dawn of acceptance creeps in. No matter what she has done, no matter where she has been, as Molly Brown so succinctly put it, "I ain't down yet!"

"I am still here... whether I've figured out the meaning of life or not."

But the finale — like the scene with the dying love of her life — is an affirmation for all of us... Let me put it in the real Sally-Jane Heit's own words...

"'Love Is...' was written for me by a dear friend who was my musical director before Uel Wade... His name is Robert Bendorff; he was one of the many AIDS tragedies. But before he left (at 40) we were discussing the unreliability of falling in love. I said it is all so ridiculous... whatever heat and ice we may bring to relationships, it would be nice to try to realize that love simply exists... he went home and wrote that song for me...

"Love is... that simple,

Love is... that's all

How could it take me all this time to recall

those tiny moments that mean so much —

an unexpected smile, a glancing touch?

...Love is... that says it.

Love takes the chance...

Instead of sitting all alone, join the dance,

for it's a music much too lovely to ignore.

I will remember...

It's all so easy

Love is...

Love is...

Love is...

There isn't anymore."

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