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"Young performer pays tribute to World War II-era USO"

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S AMANTHA Joy Pearlman is ready to party like it's 1944.

Tonight, the 23-year-old Wesleyan University grad opens a two-day, three-show run of *Devotedly, Sincerely Yours: The Story of the USO*, at the Harold Prince Theater at the **Annenberg Center**, on the University of Pennsylvania campus. The small musical revue pays tribute to the women entertainers who sacrificed personal safety to bring a little musical comfort and joy to American soldiers during World War II.

That Pearlman isn't even old enough to remember the Gulf War may make her subject matter rather surprising. But, as she explained during a recent phone call, it was a no-brainer, especially once her research began in earnest.

I've always loved World War II history and that style of movies and music, and that was definitely the period in history I wanted to focus on, she said.

Actually, the musicale, which played the 2012 Philly Fringe Festival, began life as an academic, rather than show business, exercise.

Pearlman, a native of Westchester County, north of New York City, decided to do her senior thesis on some aspect of World War II. Her research led her to a cache of 25 boxes containing scripts, publicity releases and other material relating to the USO (United Service Organization), the private, non-profit entity which, to this day, provides entertainment and recreational programs for military personnel here and abroad.

Thanks to this treasure trove of souvenirs, Pearlman completely fell in love with the stories of all these courageous women, and so I started to study them and write about them and emulate them.

But the game-changer for the young woman was one particular artifact contained in the archives. The first box I look at, she recalled, there was an eight-page letter from this woman, Louise Buckley—the character I play in the show—describing her experiences entertaining the troops; (there were) 'thousands of men in the rain,' all of the things she was experiencing.

After I read this letter, (I knew) this was gonna be my play, my field of study - to learn about the women that did this great service for our country.

As for the score, Pearlman said that while it contains standards like *Accentuate the Positive* and *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, and tunes by such immortals as Irving Berlin and Frank Loesser, many of the songs she performs are by the lesser-known (but extremely successful and prolific) team of James Monaco and Johnny Burke, who primarily wrote for movies.

Although nostalgia has a role in *Devotedly, Sincerely Yours*, Pealman insisted that there was more than sentimentality at play in her show.

I think by performing USO material from before, it helps both citizens and servicemen and -women to reflect upon our country's history and how we identify ourselves as American, and what that mean to us, she said.

To perform what was performed for military men in the '40s for a civilian audience today carries a lot of power and point of reflection for all of us to look and see how we celebrate what our identity is today.

The Harold Prince Theater, at the **Annenberg Center**, 3680 Walnut Street, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, \$30, \$25 and \$20, 215-898-3900, annenbergcenter.org.

'4000 Miles,' one question

We have but one question for Amy Herzog, whose play, *4000 Miles*, runs through Nov. 10 at the Suzanne Roberts Theatre: What is the point?

Herzog's script is slick and frequently chuckle-worthy. And the four-person cast is convincing. But damned if we can figure out why we should care about the characters and their problems which, to appropriate a famous movie line, don't amount to a hill of beans.

4000 Miles, which opens Philadelphia Theatre Company's 2013- 2014 season, concerns Leo, a slackerish, 20-something who unexpectedly arrives at his grandmother's Manhattan apartment following the freak death of his best friend, with whom he was on a cross-country bike tour. Leo is also unemployed and at the end of a relationship with a young woman who is weary of Leo's Peter Pan existence.

Plenty of fodder, to be sure. But ultimately, there is no heft in the (mercifully short) one-act play. We receive no insights or revelations into the human condition, just a series of scenes focusing on the various issues with which the characters are grappling.

The best reason to see *4000 Miles* is the turn by Beth Dixon as Vera, Leo's grandmother. Dixon convincingly portrays the frustrations and sadness borne of the aging process (Vera's accelerating memory loss is at the heart of the character). But she also gets the lion's share of punch lines, which she delivers with impeccable comic timing.

Davy Raphaely is strong as Leo, alternately evincing empathy and contempt, while Shannon Marie Sullivan (as Leo's ex-girlfriend) and Leigha Kato as his unsuccessful one-night-stand are likewise on-point.

But, ultimately, *4000 Miles* is a long way to go for no emotional or philosophical payoff.

Suzanne Roberts Theatre, Broad and Lombard streets, show times vary, \$59 and \$52 (plus \$5 ticket handling/building fee), 215-985-0420, philadelphiatheatrecompany.org.

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Highlights: Annenberg Center