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EDFRINGE REVIEW: Velvet Determination – Online Streaming & Greenside Venues, Edinburgh

Reviewer: Helen Tope



The Reviews Hub · 14/08/2022 · 0 · 2 minutes read

Writer: Cynthia Shaw

Director: Peter Michael Marino

Founded in 2018, PRO.ACT Fest is a Ukrainian theatre festival. It specialises in theatre performances and workshops. This year, its theme is “Unbreakable”. While the festival cannot take place in Kyiv, the organisers are offering online performances from around the world. [Editors note – this production was reviewed via online stream but the production is also showing at this year’s Edinburgh Fringe]

Leaning into the festival’s theme of tenacity and perseverance is one-woman show, Velvet Determination. Written and performed by American pianist Cynthia Shaw, she walks onto a bare stage, just a keyboard and stool. She briefly introduces herself to the audience, and plays an excerpt of Bach. The effect is spellbinding and joyous.

The show is part-performance, part-autobiography as Shaw retells her life story, and how she became a pianist. Shot through with dark humour, Shaw’s journey into the world of classical music is far from

straightforward. Growing up in small-town America (Pueblo, Colorado), Shaw remembers her first introduction to the allure of New York City – a copy of *The New Yorker* in a doctor's office. She thumbs through the pages to find listings of concerts and recitals taking place all over the city. This is a place where music thrives.

Shaw also delineates her background. Coming from a musical family, her interest in music was coupled with feelings of inadequacy. The spectre of Shaw's father haunts the show: a jazz musician of real skill, he bottled a pivotal audition early in his career and ended up staying in Pueblo. Shaw is left determined not to make the same mistake: her life becomes devoted to mastering the piano and getting the hell out of her hometown. But in the back of her mind, there is a niggling question. If her distant, unfulfilled father isn't interested in hearing her play, who else would want to listen to her? Shaw's talent starts getting her noticed, with scholarships and grants. Her mission is to secure a place at the prestigious Manhattan School of Music. But as Shaw puts it: "my world was getting bigger, but so were my insecurities".

Velvet Determination details Shaw's struggle to be heard – personally and professionally. Shaw is an engaging presence onstage, as she plays for us. She mimics the great pianists (Vladimir Horowitz's flashy *Stars and Stripes Forever* is a particular highlight), and she wows us with a fiendish piece of Brahms; an audition piece for the Manhattan School.

This is a show built for classical music fans – it is stuffed full of goodies from Beethoven to Brahms. But behind the pyrotechnics, there is real psychological insight at work. Shaw's enigmatic father, and his coolness towards his family, means he is frustratingly out of reach and unaccountable. It is Shaw's missing piece of the puzzle and it never quite resolves itself.

An artist plagued with self-doubt is hardly breaking new ground, but Shaw keeps us entertained with a lightness of touch and self-deprecating jokes – but not too many. Her ability at the keyboard is dazzling and formidable. The confidence she feels is lacking announces itself on the keys. As she plays, everyone listens.

Available Online until 21 August 2022 via Scenesaver | 27 Aug at Edinburgh Fringe

The Reviews Hub Score dazzling and formidable

