

NY Theatre Guide

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By Jacquelyn Claire

The Cell presents *Shoes and Baggage*, superbly written and performed by Broadway veteran, Cheryl Stern, with music by Tom Kochan. This is billed as a one-woman show but she plays so many characters it feels like there is a troupe on stage and all of them are covered in colorful couture. The show deals on one level with our “insatiable urge to purchase and possess beautiful things” and getting “high on the buy,” but on another level, it is about the complex relationships women have with their family, friends, and themselves.

... a little brown bag full of goodies you just must have!

It is an intensely personal account of her journey as a daughter, sister, wife, friend, and actress. Cheryl is obsessed with buying clothes, particularly shoes and bags. She is driven to buy even when she really can't afford it and experiences the shame of overspending and the inability to curb her obsession and addiction. Stern can rattle off the names of designers as if they are close friends and she seduces us with the fervor of her first Louis Vuitton bag acquisition. She has two friends who experience the same compulsions and they can quickly stir each other into a buying frenzy.

You might think that this is a light, comedic romp, about silly shopping but it is not. The buying is the metaphor for our need for validation, acceptance, and self love. Cheryl introduces us to her mother and sister and shares moments of her childhood draped in clothing moments that speak volumes about how we deflect pain. The flashbacks were beautifully fragile and in soft focus. It allowed us a moment to reflect on our own wounded wardrobes and tragic beauty myths.

Stern takes us with her to rehearsals, even on 9/11, opening night red carpet walks, and backstage sharing. She reveals the intricacies of her closest female friendships and how she is left threadbare by the loss of them in her life. We even do a stint with her on the *Home Shopping Network* where she works as an acting coach to a shoe mogul. Through all the stories she maintains a gentle humility and a constant striving to go through the external to find herself. And all of these layers are delivered to us with song. Clever, witty, heartbreaking song. Many of the songs lyrics are extraordinarily intelligent.

The Cell was glamorously transformed into a kind of fashion ramp/dressing room. I found the staging remarkable. Director Joe Barros made clever use of the space and created the perfect world for Cheryl to flourish. He made such good choices and created beautiful sequences with his strong, focused, directorial hand. You can see that an enormous amount of care and hard work has gone into the creation of this original work. The lighting and projection design by Nathan W. Sheuer was fantastically cheeky and also extremely sensitive to highlighting the deeper emotional journey. M. Florian Staab's sound design was so integrated into the whole and didn't jump out but added substantially to the story telling. David Perlman's opening video was hilarious and set the perfect tone for the opening of the show. We started with huge laughter only to move softly into sadder, necessary territory.

I just loved the band, seated in what felt like the ceiling. They were so in tune with Cheryl and never overpowered her, only held her aloft. Musical director, John DiPinto, brought Tom Kochan's orchestrations powerfully to life and invigorated the strong text with skill and passion.

Cheryl Stern is an old pro, a working actress that knows how to enliven the boards with a mighty performance. She was a dynamo-dancing full out, belting beautifully, and taking us to very real emotional places with her tender words and heartfelt performance. This is a little brown bag full of goodies you just must have!

Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes with no intermission

Shoes and Baggage plays through June 3, 2016 at The Cell in NYC.