

Getting Out

Calendar Girls

By Sheila Barth

Hurry and get to Greater Boston Stage Company's heartwarming comedy, "Calendar Girls," before it ends Sunday afternoon. Directed by superlative actress Nancy E. Carroll, the play makes you laugh and cry at the same time - enjoying every minute of it.

First off, the story is real, but playwright Tim Firth took some literary license, making his play as funny dramatic, compelling, and inspirational at times, as the authentic event. You probably remember the hoop-la surrounding the news story of 11 dignified,

proper, middle-aged British ladies from the small British village of Knapeley in the Yorkshire Dales, who are members of the their local Women's Institute branch. They wanted to raise a goodly sum of money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Research Fund, and decided to do it in an outrageous, unconventional manner - create an eye-opening version of the annual fund-raising calendar by posing nude - not naked, heaven forbid! What they didn't foresee is their calendar would catch the public's eye, not just locally and nationally, but internationally, raising more than \$2 million pounds, British currency.

Besides the film's meteoric box office success, the play opened at the Chichester Festival Theatre and became the fastest selling play in British theater history. Currently, Greater Boston Stage Company's production is another potential award-winning front-runner, primarily because of the fantastic cast and design team.

The cast's off-stage camaraderie and affection for each other makes their warm, clubby relationship onstage even more realistic, as they maneuver through calisthenics, brainstorm activities and fundraisers, and share their characters' families' news. Their interaction, joking, and spot-on

timing is priceless.

After their decision to pose nude for their onetime fund-raising calendar, It's a hoot to watch these ladies build covers around each other, as each poses nude, behind a big batch of cherry-topped buns, a long knitting project, elaborate tea service, big bunch of sunflowers, and more. However, their December group photo is hilarious.

The only drawback for me is some cast members' faux British accent that, at times, I found difficult to discern. Portraying self-effacing, timid Ruth, sublime actress Sarah deLima, who's originally from England, is easily understood. And deLima has additional self-motivation in this play. The proud award-winning actress-mother of four, grandmother of eight, successfully battled cancer at Dana-Farber Institute.

"Having been a leukemia patient at Dana-Farber, [now in excellent health!], and cared for by a miracle team of doctors, among them my beloved daughter, Jane, I am thrilled that Greater Boston Stage Company has joined with Dana-Farber in presenting this production. There is something almost magical to me that the two completely different worlds of a palliative care physician and her actress mother should meet and mutually support each other in this way," she said in an earlier interview.

BOX OFFICE

Two-act, 2-1/2 hour play, script by Tim Firth, based on a true story and the 2003 Miramax film Firth co-wrote with Juliette Towhidi. Features a cast of Boston's finest, award-winning actors, through June 17: Wednesday, Sunday, 2 p.m.; Thursday, 7:30 p.m.; Friday, Saturday, 8 p.m., Greater Boston Stage Company, 395 Main St., Stoneham. \$50-\$60; seniors, \$45-\$55; students with valid ID, \$20. greaterbostonstage.org, 781-279-2200.

Multi-award winning Karen MacDonald is fantastic portraying Chris, who pushes all limits, motivates the ladies, and gets the action moving, despite their modesty. MacDonald warmly interacts with charming Maureen Brennan, portraying Chris' sweet-natured bestie, Annie. Unfortunately, Annie received heartbreaking news. Her husband John (terrific Sean McGuirk), is diagnosed with cancer. It's heart-rending to watch John maintain his dignity and love for Annie while becoming increasingly ill, losing his hair, and trying valiantly to stay alive.

After John dies, the women decide to raise money to buy a plaque to hang in his memory and a settee for the local hospital waiting room.

Veteran award-winning actress Bobbie Steinbach is nonchalant as Jessie; Mary Potts Dennis is sleek and sexy at times as shapely Celia; and the inimitable Kerry A. Dowling portraying

Cora, the church organist, is outstanding, per usual.

North Shore theatergoers enjoy popular Cheryl McMahon's portrayal of Marie, church and Women's Institute conservative leader; award-winning actor Nael Nacer as photographer Lawrence; Michael Kay portraying Chris' husband, Rod; and Jade Guerra, who rounds out the cast as Elaine and offstage character, Liam.

At the end of the show, Stoneham's own shining star, Kathy St. George, (she's a hoot portraying socialites Lady Cravenshire and Brenda Hulse) announced two actors will collect donations at the door. So besides enjoying a heartwarming play with a superlative cast, theatergoers may contribute cash to the institute, with hopes of someday soon eradicating cancer altogether. St. George assured theatergoers 100 percent of their donations go directly to Dana-Farber Research.