

"Emergency Used Candles" Warms the Heart

A tender, touching Valentine to a beloved granddad

By Beatrice Williams-Rude

The Barefoot Theatre Company's production of Chiara Montalto's paean to "Pop," is now at the Cherry Lane Theatre's Studio Theatre and well worth any effort it takes to see it.

This highly personal work stars its creator, Chiara Montalto. Also credited as part of the creative team are Andrew Struzzieri and Theresa Gambacorta.

So seamless is the effective direction by Victoria Malvagno, it's almost invisible -- things seem to happen spontaneously.

Crucial to the play is the background music, mostly old Sinatra records, tellingly provided by sound designer Eric Nightengale. The suitable set is by Tom Lenz.

This is a one-woman work, but it doesn't appear to be, so beautifully does Chiara Montalto evoke all the other characters, most particularly "Pop." As herself, the granddaughter, she is delightful, funny, sharp yet affectionate as she portrays the foibles of her grandfather as well as the ironies in her own life. For example: "I find making meatballs utterly disgusting. I'll only make them if I really love the person who'll be eating them. I'm a vegetarian. Ground up bloody flesh ... fleshy cold grossness in my hands, the most disgusting thing ever. I make him meatballs every Sunday afternoon."

Chiara, the character, is beautifully delineated and performed; we, the audience, know what's about to befall her before she knows it herself. A most attractive young woman, she nonetheless convinces us of her problems with men -- and of her grandfather's attitude toward her unmarried state.

The play is set in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, an exemplar of a diverse New York neighborhood. When Chiara can't use her oven to cook all the dishes she's prepared for her grandfather's surprise birthday party -- either his 92nd or 93rd -- her neighbors help out with their ovens -- pork to the Chinese family, lamb to the Greeks, eggplant "Parmigian" to the Italians. At the birthday party the audience joins in singing "Happy Birthday dear Pop," such is the power of the play.

"Emergency Used Candles" refers to the collection of "Pop," who maintains that someday they'll come in handy, which indeed they do during the blackout of 1965. They're a metaphor for his concern and his taking every precaution to protect his treasured granddaughter.

The performance was seen on a miserable, cold, wet, no-taxis-in-sight evening when the reviewer would rather have been at home; however, within minutes of the play's beginning, the cold turned to warmth, the resentment (at having to brave the weather) to an affectionate embrace.

Anyone concerned with the human condition will like this work; anyone who has ever been really close to a family member will love it.

#