

Review: When a musician can't hit those notes anymore, what's left?

By Brent Hallenbeck

The production of Stephen Goldberg's play "Burning Bridges" in the Old North End provides a thought-provoking contrast to the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival that's rampaging through downtown right now. "Burning Bridges" doesn't have that same listen-in-awe-to-a-performer-in-control vibe that the jazz festival has. Instead, Goldberg's play reveals the portion of a musician's life that the stage doesn't show — the self-abuse, the insecurities, the moments spent not in the light but in the shadow.

Goldberg is not just Burlington's most provocative playwright; he's also a trumpet player, which infuses "Burning Bridges" with a quality Goldberg's often bleak, abstract plays lack. Goldberg's fondness for music allows him to build "Burning Bridges" on a foundation of love. There's love for jazz (the play is presented in cooperation with the jazz festival), but there's also interpersonal love that promises to head toward something loftier than the inevitable demise love usually meets in Goldberg's work.

This is the third staging of "Burning Bridges," and the second time Goldberg has taken on his own lead role as down-and-out trumpet player Tony Franks. Franks' girlfriend, Sheila (played with kindly ferocity by Tracey Girdich), isn't in much better shape than he is — it certainly doesn't help that she's simultaneously supporting and discouraging his drinking and drugging habits — but she is at least trying to get him up off the mat after his long fall from musical success.

After call upon call leads nowhere, Sheila finally finds something for Tony. Peggy (Emily Day), a singing star who happens to be the daughter of one of Tony's most beloved old musical friends, wants him to record on her next album. Tony won't have it. "Tell 'em I'm sick, tell 'em I'm dead," he implores Sheila. "I want you to understand — I can't hit the notes anymore."

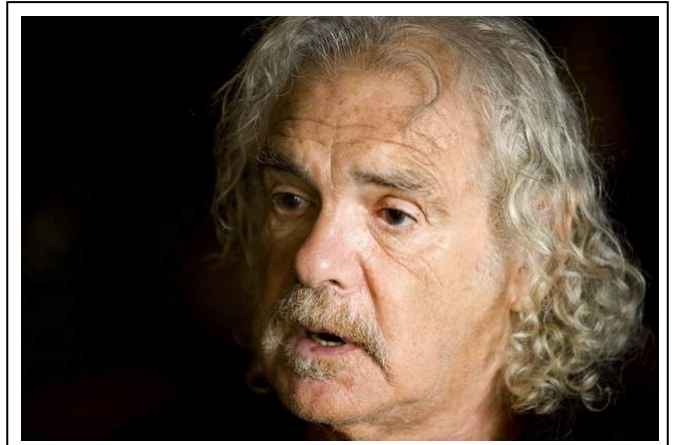
Things don't get better in the studio, where Tony demonstrates he really can't hit the notes anymore. The impatient rock 'n' roll producer (Paul Schnabel) who's working with Peggy doesn't want to deal with the cantankerous trumpet player, but Peggy says it's Tony's sound she wants on her album. Plus, she makes clear she wants to save this man who more than anyone except her parents influenced her successful musical career. Yet redemption seems unlikely to happen for Tony and even more unlikely to happen in a play by Goldberg.

"Burning Bridges" is ostensibly about a man who has indeed burned his bridges, with the finality that cliché suggests. But it also implies that Tony Franks was once capable of playing burning bridges — scorching transitions in jazz numbers — so what's to suggest he can't burn some of those bridges again?

This is certainly one of Goldberg's most linear and direct plays, but still bears his trademarks of caustic language, frank sexuality and weird, dark humor ("You really stabbed him? That's so hot!"). As strong as the script is, however, the greatest thing about "Burning Bridges" is the music; the second act featuring the recording session highlights Day's remarkable vocals (she's known more locally as a vocal coach than as a performer) and terrific supporting work from bass player Ben Littenberg and legendary Burlington jazz musician James Harvey on keyboards. Even Goldberg's playing, while meant to sound sadly short of its heyday, has a beautiful weariness to it.

The music, fortunately, is more than just theatrical window dressing. The unspoken discomfort Goldberg and Day display after his so-so solo in the otherwise sultry "These Foolish Things" carries the story line along in a way the best musical theater could only hope to. Credit director Allan Nicholls of Burlington (a film actor and assistant director who has worked frequently with famed director Robert Altman) for knowing when to throw a well-timed punch to subtly spark Goldberg's crisp, austere script. The acting, aside from Girdich's usual top-notch work, is minimal; though "Burning Bridges" is scripted, the lines uttered by the musician-actors almost feel as spur-of-the-moment as a jazz performer's ad-libbed riffs.

"Burning Bridges" keeps pace with the best of music. It moves from slow tempo to fast, from downbeat to upbeat, from wallowing to enthralling. Maybe it's not so different from the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival after all.



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