

Theater Review: Goldberg play offers jazz as well as heart

By Jim Lowe

BURLINGTON — There isn't much left for a has-been drugged-out jazz trumpeter.

Or is there?

Vermont playwright Stephen Goldberg stars as that trumpeter in a reprise of his own 1999 "Burning Bridges," which opened Wednesday at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts. The compelling production, which runs through June 11, includes fine performances by some of the area's top jazz musicians.

"Burning Bridges" is a surprisingly optimistic work from Goldberg, the prolific chronicler of life's underbelly. Tony Franks, loosely based on the short-lived Tony Fruscella (1927-1969), has given up — but his "old lady" Sheila has other plans.

After many a futile attempt, Sheila has found Tony a recording gig with an old friend's daughter, who is making it big. But Tony is scared, sure that he no longer has the chops to pull it off. And the hip recording engineer, who has no time for a seedy has-been like Tony, does his best to break Tony.

What ensues is the unexpected — gritty and authentic.

The production, directed by Allan Nicholls, feels just that way: authentic. Goldberg is completely convincing as the dissipated musician, proving a quietly competent actor. But it is Tracey Girdich, as the not-so-quietly suffering girlfriend, who propels the action in the first part with a powerful performance.

In many ways, the star of the second act, set in the recording studio, is the music. We see impressive performances of jazz standards ostensibly being recorded, as Goldberg, a fine professional jazz trumpeter, is joined by the excellent jazz singer Emily Day, who proves to be quite a competent actress.

They are backed by two of the area's top jazz musicians, James Harvey as Freddy on electronic keyboard and Ben Littenberg as Bill on stand-up bass. Paul Schnabel is delightfully obnoxious as the recording engineer, Phil.

The David Mamet language notwithstanding, Goldberg's "Burning Bridges" is almost heartwarming — with a delightfully black comic touch.



Sheila (Tracey Girdich) and Tony (Stephen Goldberg) share a rare intimate moment in Goldberg's "Burning Bridges," running through June 11 at Burlington's Off Center for the Dramatic Arts. Photo: Jim Lowe