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ENTERTAINMENT CAREY GILLETTE (EDITOR) • 604-605-2307 • cgillette@theprovince.com | MONDAY, JULY 20, 2009

THE POWER OF LOVE

PLAY ABOUT EDITH PIAF:

Actress Naomi Emmerson's one-woman production leaves the hard times faced by the Parisian singer by focusing on the romantic joy of her early life

GLEN SCHAEFER B2



MUSICAL THEATRE

Legendary French singer comes to life in one-woman stage show

Naomi Emmerson has played the part for five-plus years

BY ELIZABETH NOLAN
DETTWOOD STAFF

Edith Piaf, the diminutive French woman with the larger-than-life voice, is a singer whose life story and songs continue to have cultural resonance decades after her death.

Just ask Naomi Emmerson, the star of the theatrical biography, *Piaf: Love Conquers All*. For more than five years she's been bringing the chanteuse's life and music to audiences around the world and shows no sign of stopping.

Emmerson first performed the role at Toronto's Linelight Supper Club in 1993. In 2005, she and her husband Jake Langley formed their own production company to take Robert Pearce's play to Toronto's Fringe Festival. Their success inspired further runs, including at the FringeNYC and Montreal's Centaur Theatre and in the Philippines. The bilingual Montreal native (now based in Brooklyn) has even won over French-speaking critics with her interpretation.

Now on a B.C. tour that includes Vancouver's Firehall Theatre and the Mary Winspear Centre in Sidney, Emmerson is pleased to take the play to Salt Spring, her parents' home for 20 years and the place she and her husband were married.

Describing the play as a positive story that draws on Piaf's tragic circumstances, but ultimately celebrates her twin passions for music and love, Emmerson said Piaf is entertaining whether you've heard of the subject or not.

"If you knew Piaf before, it's nice to have a meeting with an old friend, and if you didn't, you would have found a new



A scene from *Piaf: Love Conquers All*.

friend," Emmerson said.

Having now appeared as Piaf several nights a week for years, Emmerson has had ample opportunity to build the character into a complex, nuanced personality.

"Because I was so young, I didn't really know what I was doing. I just sort of approached it from whatever was happening in the script," Emmerson said of her earliest appearance.

"Since then, so many books have been written on her life, and so many more recordings

having a little back pain or I'm a little tired. I can bring that in. And the director's not going to give me any trouble, because I am the director!"

The real person behind the story was born in 1915 and raised in poverty on the streets of Paris, and later became one of France's biggest stars. She was addicted to morphine and alcohol and attended rehab four times. As Emmerson noted, "It's a tough battle when you're self-medicating. She had a lot of pain to kill."

"I always equate her to a kind of Kurt Cobain, or Billie Holiday, because there are people around who want those people to be famous because it makes the entourage a lot of money. So they keep her medicated even though it might not be so good for the star."

Despite her pain, Piaf believed that if you had love and you had music, everything would be okay, and it's this spirit that motivates the script. Piaf's songs have always had the ability to reach people, and even those who don't remember her name will probably recognize her signature tune, *La Vie en Rose*.

The lasting strength of the compositions — and Emmerson's ability to sing them — is no doubt the real appeal of the play. Emmerson performs 13 of Piaf's songs accompanied by live piano, including *La Vie en Rose* as well as *Non, Je ne Regrette Rien*, *Hymne à L'Amour* and *Les Blouses Blanches*, found in a rare recording and a particular favourite of Emmerson's.

Piaf: *Love Conquers All* appears at ArtSpring Wednesday through Saturday, Aug. 5-8 at 7 p.m.; Aug. 12-15, 7 p.m. and closes on Sunday, Aug. 16 at 2:30 p.m.

Tickets are available at the ArtSpring ticket centre, by calling 250-537-2102, in person or online through www.artspring.ca.

Legacy of music, tragedy

NON, JE NE REGRET RIEN: One-woman musical retells life of Edith Piaf

On stage

Piaf: Love Conquers All

Where: Firehall Arts Centre, 280 E. Cordova St.

When: Runs Wednesday to Aug. 2, Wednesdays to Saturdays at 8 p.m., 2 p.m. matinees Saturdays and Sundays.

Tickets: \$32-\$40 at 604-689-0926 or www.firehallartscentre.ca

BY GLEN SCHAEFER
STAFF REPORTER

Singer-actress Naomi Emmerson was in her mid-20s when she first encountered the legacy of Edith Piaf in 1993, but that legacy has now become part of her life.

"Before each show, I look in the corner and I kind of see her and thank her," says the Montreal-born Emmerson, who has travelled from New York to the Philippines with her one-woman stage show *Piaf: Love Conquers All*. "If it wasn't for her, I would have a different kind of career."

Piaf started singing on the streets of Paris as a girl, and her voice took her to international acclaim before her death at a drug- and disease-ravaged 47 in 1963. Her tragic life was most recently retold in the 2007 movie *La Vie en Rose*, which won French star Marion Cotillard a best-actress Oscar.

Love Conquers All, by Montreal playwright Robert Pearce, leaves the hard times by emphasizing the romantic and creative joy of her early life, says Emmerson, who was first approached to replace Quebec star Patsy Gallant in the play when it moved from Montreal to Toronto.

"In the first act, we get to see Piaf as a vivacious young woman, where her love songs are filled with truth because she's in love," says Emmerson, who took on a producer's role as well when she remounted the play for the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2005 and followed that with a tour of Ontario and Quebec.

"At first I didn't really know who Piaf was," says Emmerson, who has since become a collector of Piaf recordings, video, books and memorabilia. "I have about 12 of her movies, 50 CDs, a lot of vinyl."

An older fan came from New York to see a Montreal staging of her show, and he turned out to be the son of a club-owner who had booked Piaf's New York appearances in the 1940s and '50s. "He later sent me all this paraphernalia from the club, photos of Piaf with Marlene Dietrich and Lena



Singer-actress Naomi Emmerson stars in the one-woman musical *Piaf: Love Conquers All*. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

Horne. It was so wonderful to hear someone like that, who was 15 years old when he was bringing her water to the dressing room, for him to say that it felt like he was back seeing Piaf." When Emmerson's jazz-guitarist husband Jake Langley was drawn to New York City for his art, Emmerson restaged the play at New York's fringe festival in 2007, where it was named best musical. The play had a post-festival run at a New York club and has kept going in various venues ever since.

"It's exhausting — basically, I'm talking and singing for two hours with a

15-minute break," says Emmerson. "There's so much life in the storytelling."

Emmerson started out singing in rock bands when she was 17 and moved on to music and theatre studies at Concordia University before Piaf came calling.

"It's pretty much all I do," she says of her onstage alter-ego. "The next thing we're working on, I've commissioned someone to translate the script into French. We have a booking in Quebec City in April 2010. I can probably give it a couple more years."

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