

## A HANDFUL OF MEMORIES — ELIZABETH PEAVEY STAYS CONNECTED IN ONE-WOMAN SHOW 'MY MOTHER'S CLOTHES ARE NOT MY MOTHER'

Megan Grumbling  
Theater | Nov 13, 2017

In what we now think of as the “Mad Men” era, Shirley Peavey was a fashion plate. Shirley’s cocktail gowns and mohair sweaters “advertised her good taste,” explains her daughter, longtime local writer Elizabeth Peavey, and became symbolic — even sacred — in her conception of her mother. And so when Shirley passes away, how can Peavey let these clothes go? Easing her way through her mother’s closet and her own memory, Peavey muses on life, death, grief, and the mother-daughter relationship in her funny, poignant one-woman show, *My Mother’s Clothes Are Not My Mother*. After touring the state for years, *My Mother’s Clothes* has now been revamped in a sharp and moving new production at the Public Theatre in Lewiston, under the direction of Janet Mitchko.

The trajectory of *My Mother’s Clothes Are Not My Mother* began in 2008, when Peavey’s mother passed away, and she has been touring the show since 2011; two years later, she won the Maine Literary Award for Best Drama. More recently, the Public Theatre was awarded a \$10,000 NEA grant to develop the show, looking to elaborate upon its themes around caregiving and the obligations between parent and child. The result, on the Public Theatre’s stage, is an affecting, sometimes edgy, very non-maudlin meditation on how we grieve.

As she moves between the clothing and the containers meant to take them away, on a simple set of racks and boxes, Peavey’s presence on stage is engaging in movement and affect. Angular, lanky, and agile, she gamely takes on a range of physical comedy — bouncing and jiggling as she describes a body-toning machine of her mom’s era; ending a list-y monologue of supermarket items with a grin and some jazz hands. And her onstage persona deftly balances her wit and sadness. Peavey has had some years now with this material, but it still feels fresh and deeply felt.

That’s due partly to her presence and partly to her writing, which is rich in remembered details of her younger mother, her cocktails, cigarettes, and Ayds (“nothing more than chocolate-covered amphetamines”). The arc of the show proceeds gracefully from memories of childhood to those of teenage Peavey, including a sartorial standoff between daughter’s “angry urban angst-wear” and mother’s “prissy Talbot’s pastels.” Later, with her mother’s decline and their inevitable role reversal, she describes her mother’s scalp as feeling “small and bony, like a newborn.” And Peavey has a keen way of expressing the irrational but nonetheless real — and sometimes helplessly funny — absurdities we harbor around what a loved person has touched. “Her foot was in this footie!” she exclaims. “I can’t let somebody else wear my mother’s footie!”

And at its best, *My Mother’s Clothes Are Not My Mother* has the stirring specificity of poetry: An image of her mother before a porcelain sink, smoking and ironing as “Tangled up in Blue” plays on the radio. Her mother in the bathroom wallpapered with Siamese cats, smoking Lucky Strikes and drawing in her eyebrows with “a pencil that she licked.” Her mother, near the end, while shopping at Hannaford, taking the time to finally really, tenderly look at — to finally “meet” — a small bundle of sage. And Peavey’s description of seeing her mother through her actual passing, moment by moment and right before her eyes, is beautifully likened to pushing a boat out to sea: “All we had to do was open our hands and let go.”

With eloquence and wit, *My Mother’s Clothes Are Not My Mother* underscores the fundamental, tragicomic tension between our beloved materiality and our mortal, intangible end. All this stuff we love is just stuff, and we know it. But it’s also, as Peavey puts it, what “tethers us to this earth.” It’s not all we’ll keep of the people who have left their tethers, but it’s the easiest to touch.