

On the Rocks rocks: review

Autobiographical musical filled with new works she co-wrote with her husband



Michael Cooper
Louise Pitre in *On the Rocks*.

By: [Richard Ouzounian](#) Theatre Critic, Published on Thu Sep 26 2013

On the Rocks

3 stars

Conceived, written and performed by Louise Pitre. Directed by Jen Shuber. Until Sept. 28 at Theatre Passe Muraille, 16 Ryerson Ave. 416-504-7529.

Anyone who's ever seen [Louise Pitre](#) stop a show with her trademark combination of heart and talent will know that this woman has guts to spare.

But even I wasn't prepared for the display of sheer bravery that she puts on display in *On the Rocks*, her new autobiographical musical that opened Wednesday night at [Theatre Passe Muraille](#), which I saw at its final preview.

I think the bravest decision she made was NOT to include any of the dozens of famous songs she's been associated with in her stellar career. It would have been easy to coast along on a sea of hits from *Les Miserables*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well* and *Living in Paris*, *Piaf* and *Mame*. But Pitre will have none of it.

Together with her husband, W. Joseph Matheson, she's written a collection of powerful and persuasive musical numbers that tell her story beautifully. All of them are stronger musically than they are lyrically, where the sentiments, while sincere, are rather simplistically stated, but in the end, they do their job.

So does the book, which is purely Pitre's creation. She does a sweetly charming job of bringing to life her childhood days, is brutally honest about her failed first marriage and other wreckage relationships, captures the joy of her successes without making them seem like bragging and finally enters into some

pretty devastating family issues near the end, only to come out swinging, like always, the minute she hears the bell.

Yes, Pitre is a prizefighter, and her super-toned body bears witness to that fact. So do the bold gestures and outsized expressions that characterize her performances, but nothing is too much, because it's all backed up with real emotion, tons of it.

Pitre's good right arm here is her longtime musical director, [Diane Leah](#), who manages to be as unobtrusive yet supportive an associate as you can possibly imagine.

The rest of the production is decidedly on the sparse side, with the major attraction being a handful of drawings that young Louise did in her childhood.

And while one welcomes a show free of glitz and glitter, this one seems to be playing the No Frills card just a bit too strongly and some sort of an aesthetically pleasing scenic framework and more imaginative lighting would come in handy.

Jen Shuber is credited with direction and dramaturgy, but she should perhaps have worked a bit more strenuously on both. Once again, the staging mainly puts Pitre front and centre, which is a fine place for her to be, but more variety is needed. And the show's sequence devoted to the late-life Pitre family tragedies could be arranged more convincingly for maximum impact.

But, above all else, you have Pitre herself: the absolute definition of what it means to throw yourself into your material. This show should be required viewing for anyone contemplating a career in the theatre for two reasons: first, it will show you how damn soul-destroying it can be, but second, it will let you see the heights you can scale if you've got enough energy and conviction.

Pitre isn't just an actress, she's a force of nature and I'm fully confident that she'll make *On the Rocks* even better as it goes along, although right now, it's still a damned impressive piece of work that demands your attention, your respect and your attendance.