

FIRST ROOT presents THIS ONE. TORONTO, December 2014 :

In tiny spaces just off Queen West last week, two tiny plays took my breath away. One in the more metaphorical sense that it left me speechless and contemplative and moved but uncomfortable with said moving. The other in the literal sense that I was crying so hard I had trouble catching my breath.

[...]

This One, on the other hand, lives wholly in a space of goodness, if not wholly in a space of joy. Brimming with sense memory and universal relatability (everyone's got a mom, even if their experience is nothing like Denise's), This One feels personal and hits you straight in the heart because of it. Playwright/performer Denise Mader welcomes you into Fraser Studios by offering you a cup of tea. When you're stressed out, her mom used to say, drink a cup of tea. Our utterly charming hostess chats amiably with the audience as she waits for 7:30 and, when the time finally comes, she casually transitions such chatting into a performance, sharing stories of her mother as she bakes a pie (literally, the set is a functioning kitchen and she bakes as she talks). She begins sweetly, rifling through her mother's old recipe book and recounting happy tales of her childhood on the farm with her tall, wonderful mom.

I started crying about 4 minutes in, when Denise (you have to call her Denise, if she doesn't feel like an old friend by the end of this show you've massively missed the point of Denise Mader) lifted the recipe book to her face and inhaled deeply. I didn't know yet how her mother had died (though the past tense warns you that that story is coming) or how young she'd been when it happened (far too young), all I knew was that Denise was standing in the kitchen smelling her mom's old recipe book and that her mom had somehow known she wouldn't be able to locate the correct pecan pie recipe and had left her a note on the right page, "This One". I thought of the little brown box where my own mom (alive and well and likely to live to a hundred) keeps her recipes, of the note in the margin of the banana cake recipe that says "omit the nuts" (per my brother's and my request) and the well-worn card that sports the ingredients from a thousand chocolate chip coffee rings.

Denise's story is unbelievably moving entirely on its own. If I was grown in a lab and had never known the comfort of a hug from Ann Bedard (soft and cool and just the loveliest), I still would have found Denise's story unbelievably moving. Details like the way her hands rolled out pastry and perfectly chosen stories like her dancing in the kitchen to force a moody teenaged Denise to smile make Denise's mother come alive in that kitchen in Fraser Studios, and they make the loss of her hurt when Denise finally gets up the courage to tell that worst of all stories. But I wasn't grown in a lab and I do know Ann Bedard- she dragged me to the AGO just the other day, I dragged her out for sushi in return- and, when Denise smelled that recipe book or talked about leaning on her mother's arm as she stood over the stove, she harnessed the power of that relationship to make This One an emotional gutpunch. Even as we left the theatre to partake in the free pie found in the lobby after every performance, I was wiping the tears from my now mascara-free eyes. But This One isn't traumatic like Blackbird, it's beautiful and funny and wonderful so, as much as I was crying, I was smiling too.

- Kelly Bedard My Entertainment World <http://www.myentertainmentworld.ca/2014/12/emotional-spectrum-blackbird-one/>

This One, playing at Fraser Studios, is a hat trick. For the price of admission you get a lovely 60 minute play, a recipe for Pecan Pie, and a piece of pie after the show. As a bonus you get to see someone make a pie crust from scratch. All in all a delightful, delicious evening.

Denise Mader wrote the piece and performs it while she makes a pecan pie. Nice multi-tasking!

This is the first time that I've gone to a play and been offered coffee, tea, or water by the performer. Mader encouraged people to help themselves from the carafes on a table on the stage. She poured coffee for some people and even delivered it to others in their seats. There was country music playing and Mader was smiling her beautiful smile and talking to people as they arrived. It felt as if we had dropped in and were being invited into the kitchen to sip tea and chat while she made the pie.

She was in the kitchen. Andrea Mittler's set is complete with kitchen cupboards (with stuff in them) and counter, a sink, a stove, a fridge (also with stuff in it), and a table. You need a real kitchen to make a real pie. One of the things that helped create the feeling that we – the audience – were visiting in Mader's kitchen was Kaileigh Krysztofiak's lighting. The house lights never fully went down so there wasn't any real barrier between the stage and the audience.

This One is a play about Mader coming to terms with the death of her mother. One of the ways that she accomplishes this is by learning to make pie, something her mother did every Saturday. While Mader makes the pastry she tells us stories from her childhood, stories about her mother – who sounds like an amazing woman. She raised five children, worked on the farm, cooked, baked, and kept the house, and still had time to crazy dance around the kitchen. I would like to have known her. The play is a celebration of her life. My friend Glenna said how nice it was to see a play about a family that wasn't dysfunctional and angst-ridden. It really was.

It always impresses me when actors perform an autobiographical piece. They're playing themselves, or at least a version of themselves. There isn't a character to escape into. Glenna said that she's always thought that one of the good things about acting would be the chance to play a character rather than being yourself and that it must be difficult to play yourself.

Mader is an impressive actor. She has great timing and her performance was relaxed and polished. No mean feat because she seems like someone who is bursting with energy. You need a good director to play yourself well and Melee Hutton's direction was strong.

It's a fairly short play at 60 minutes but I was surprised when it ended, it didn't feel like an hour had passed. It's a perfect piece for a winter evening.

And the pie was delicious.

- Sam Mooney Mooney on Theatre <http://www.mooneyontheatre.com/2014/12/05/review-this-one-first-root/#more-22728>

This hour-long production isn't just another play! It's an experience. And it's an experience because our hero, Denise Mader, isn't on stage as a character...she's on stage as herself. In essence, THIS ONE is an exhibit of Mader's vulnerability, healing, and deliverance. Of course, you're watching something scripted (after all, some of the narrative is focussed on subject matter meant to generate interesting text, like her mother's love for pie baking and her own desire to master her mother's recipes), but when Mader delivers poignant recounts of the events that occurred all those years ago, it feels like she's a friend opening up to you in the comfort of her home.

It's hard to believe that this piece fits under the umbrella of independent theatre. Dora-award winning set designer, Andrea Mittler, delivers a set that is arguably on par with the Stratford Festival sets she has had a hand in building, and Dora-nominated director and performer, Melee Hutton, does great job of bringing everything together, and uses Denise's great range, as appropriate, throughout the piece.

The pre-show tea and post-show pie (made by Denise herself) also made the evening an experience. My overall takeaway is this: Denise Mader is a remarkably talented woman full of vibrancy and promise. She is someone we need to see more of, and I think we will! I would welcome this, as my only criticism for THIS ONE is that it was far too short. I wanted to see more!

- Jason Murray, Co-Creator and Partner, eBOSS Canada <http://ebosscanada.com/news/youve-gotta-see-this-one--theatre-review.html>

This One really hits home

Fraser Studios has been around for the past seven years, helping to build the arts community in Toronto by offering a variety of classes and workshops, as well as providing a space for artists to showcase their work. From now until Dec. 14, Fraser Studios will be the home for First Root founder Denise Mader's new one-woman show This One. This One features York University alum Denise Mader, recounting the experiences she had with her mother, up until her untimely passing; all the while she is attempting to prepare and bake a pecan pie. The original piece ran approximately twenty minutes, and was presented during the summer of 2012 at York University as a part of Mader's Master of Fine Arts program. "I started to work on the show by going through my notebooks from the past year," writes Mader. "Highlighting all of the phrases peppered throughout that were marked with 'solo show idea,' and I realized that upwards of eighty percent of them were about my mom."

The show has since been expanded with the help of piece director Melee Hutton. The piece is now just shy of an hour and contains an intimate look into the highlights of the time that Denise and her mother had spent together. Mader presents these stories in a very natural way, as more of a conversation between herself and the audience, speaking directly from the heart. She connects with the audience in a very deep and intimate way, and we can't help but be brought along for the entire ride. Mader is very open with the audience, even going so far as to offer us up tea, coffee or water when we enter the theatre. Her enthusiastic friendliness helps prepare us for the intimate story that will follow within the next hour. Without giving away any spoilers, I would recommend you bring some tissue to this performance.

The highlight of the piece is definitely Mader's honest and heartfelt performance, but it is certainly complimented by the Andrea Mittler's set design. The set is designed as a very realistic kitchen, with a fully stocked fridge, an oven, bowls, a full sink and an island for Mader to prepare us our pie. The set works well with the themes of Mader's story, particularly when she recounts that most of the important moments she had with her mother took place in the kitchen. She also goes on to explain how much her mother loves cooking and baking and how her specialty was pecan pie (which the audience actually gets to taste after the show). The music also plays a very important part of this piece. With her iPhone connected to the speaker system, Mader plays for us a medley of the country hits that she loved listening to with her mother. It's the fine details like this that really help add to the realism and honesty of this piece.

- Jonathan Zagrodnik The Theatre Reader <http://thetheatreader.tumblr.com/post/104716134289/this-one-really-hits-home-jonathan-zagrodnik>

THIS ONE at HAMILTON FRINGE FESTIVAL :

The last play I saw was also at Factory Media Centre (watch trailer). The piece was written and performed by Denise Mader, who also founded First Root. It's an intimate show, with Denise talking directly to us as if we were guests in her home as she baked a pie to share with us. Yes, she actually made a pie right before our eyes as she delivered her monologue which was so touching and endearing. It was impossible not to connect with Denise right away; she has a lovely spirit and it felt like you knew her.

This One was the most moving play I saw during my run at Fringe. My eyes welled up and I stifled back tears a few times. When it was over, I looked around and found I wasn't alone – there wasn't a dry eye in the bunch. Denise bared her emotions and we were privy to her memories and ultimate catharsis. It was fitting to end with this one – it was my favourite.

-Kristin Archer ihearthatilton.ca

For those who have a sensitive heart, I recommend bringing a tissue or two to This One. Right from the beginning, it

is nearly impossible not to fall in love with writer and performer Denise Mader. She is genuine and vulnerable and succeeds in immediately connecting with her audience. A sweetly apologetic Mader, in her quest to make her first pie, races around a makeshift kitchen in a search for a lost pastry cutter. As the play unfolds we realize that the baking instrument is not all she is missing. This One is a play about loss. Specifically, it is about the struggle to come to terms with life after the tragic death of a loved one. Memories remain as a constant reminder of both the sentimental past and, in stark contrast, the painful reality of the present. You feel as if you have lost half of yourself, rendering you incomplete. Mader cleverly uses her pie-baking endeavour as a metaphor for coping with her loss. Like her crust, she is fragile...but with the right ingredients of time and perspective, recovery is possible. This One is honest and brave, and although there are moments of sadness, there are many moments of laughter Mader embraces. This reviewer cannot wait to see the play as a full length piece.

-Jessica Perkins Hamilton Fringe Festival Community Reviews

Denise is an excellent storyteller, and shares intimate memories of her fun-loving yet hard-working mother, their relationship, and the tragic day everything changed. An earnest look at love and coping with loss, Mader brings the past into the present by learning to bake her mother's favourite pie recipe. A moving performance, and a copy of the recipe to take home! Looking forward to Mader's full-length adaptation of the show.

-Sean Pittman Hamilton Fringe Festival Community Reviews

THE GETAWAY at TORONTO FRINGE FESTIVAL :

"Staged in a moving van, The Getaway provides the audience, or hostages as we become in the context of the show, a backseat view to an often funny, bungled crime spree. While the story of mismatched kidnappers is clumsy at times, the main gimmick is very well executed, and the actors' banter is lively. Denise Mader is convincingly unhinged as Jillian, and veteran actor Bruce Hunter is (thankfully) a surprisingly nimble driver."

**** Eye Weekly

"A show this intimate faces the almost impossible challenge of realism, but Denise Mader and Bruce Hunter are good enough actors to pull it off and the story is impressively choreographed to develop around the city. This is a funny and entertaining show, but conventional criticism seems hardly applicable: it is, first and foremost, an experience."

-The Varsity

"For such a small and intimate performance space, the van was used very well and the action never got static. The actors would stop, sometimes exit the vehicle and sometimes even drag hostages with them leaving the rest with a different part of the show to experience... The performers are just brilliant and hilarious. There's no other way to describe it. Mader's crazed Jill was balanced with Hunter's much more grounded and stressed Dick."

-Mooney on Theatre

STEEL MAGNOLIAS at PORT STANLEY FESTIVAL THEATRE :

"There is a beautiful poignant scene with Shelby and her mother M'Lynn to begin the second act and begin the audience's need for handkerchiefs... In order for the hanky parade in the final act to occur, a strong performance by Denise Mader, as Shelby, was an absolute necessity. The audience had to love her to make her loss even more

powerful. Mader delivered the performance that made the audience love Shelby with a warmth and joyous energy.”

-St. Thomas Times-Journal