

Musical 'Breast in Show' was an opportunity to do something important

BY CELIA WREN

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You cannot accuse Eileen Mitchard of thinking small. She wants "Breast in Show," the comedy-infused musical she conceived and nurtured, to entertain audiences — but she also wants it to mobilize the entire nation behind the eradication of breast cancer.

"We have the ability to accomplish this goal, for our daughters and our granddaughters and our sisters and our mothers," says Mitchard, who collaborated on the musical with playwright Lisa Hayes and composer-lyricist Joan Cushing. "I hope this show will really get people believing that we can — and we must, and we will!"

Her goal might move a little closer to realization when "Breast in Show" opens at Virginia Repertory Theatre's Willow Lawn Stage on Thursday. The Richmond production — the musical's second public airing — continues through March 19, presented by Carol Piersol in partnership with Virginia Repertory Theatre. Billy Christopher Maupin directs the approximately 90-minute show, which features six Richmond actors and a three-piece band.

A longtime theater devotee based in the Washington area, Mitchard plunged into the creation of the musical in 2009, spurred by her friendships with people who had survived, and not survived, breast cancer. She was getting older — she is now 60 — and she felt that the project "was my opportunity to do something important," she says.

In concert with Hayes, an old friend, Mitchard proceeded to interview more than 200 patients, medical personnel and family members who had been affected by breast cancer. Drawing on the interviews, Hayes went on to write a script that followed multiple characters battling the disease.

But instilling "Breast in Show" with humor was also a priority — not only to lighten the serious content, but also because levity is such a vital tool for people battling cancer. "That's one of the things we heard over and over again" in the interviews, Mitchard says.

Key to the musical's humor is the contribution of Cushing, a musical theater writer and cabaret performer who is known in Washington for her long-running political-satire revue, "Mrs. Foggybottom & Friends." As it happens, shortly after Cushing signed on to co-create "Breast in Show," her husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She temporarily halted work on the musical to care for him. Within four months, he was dead.

"As a writer, you process everything and look at everything from many angles," Cushing says. When

she resumed work on the show, events and emotions she and her husband had experienced during those four months found their way — often comically transmuted — into songs such as “The Chemo Café,” a tongue-in-cheek ode to chemotherapy; or “The Deadliest Cell in Town,” starring a sultry cancer cell and backup singers.

When “Breast in Show” premiered, at a community center in Rockville, Md., in 2011, Cushing was astounded to realize how truly funny it was. The audience was visibly moved at times, but at other times “people were laughing and laughing,” she recalls.

She attributes the reaction to the fact that she and her collaborators captured some real truths about the cancer experience. “My husband’s life already mattered, but I feel like, in some way, I made his death matter,” she says.

After the Rockville debut, the musical found its way to Richmond thanks to Mitchard’s friend Susan Haubenstein, who introduced Mitchard to Carol Piersol, then the artistic director of Firehouse Theatre Project. Piersol read the “Breast in Show” libretto and loved its humanity and tonal balance. “It wasn’t all grim, and it wasn’t disrespectful and campy,” Piersol explains. “It was very sincere, even when it was funny.”

Piersol agreed to mount the musical at the Firehouse during the 2013 Acts of Faith Festival, and engaged Maupin to direct.

After Piersol’s departure from her Firehouse post in December in a controversy involving the company’s board of directors, “Breast in Show” found its current berth at Willow Lawn.

“Breast in Show” is still a part of the Acts of Faith festival, which is especially fitting since the show’s very existence has been a long act of faith on Mitchard’s part. She has faith that theater can inspire and energize people — in this case to get involved in the battle against breast cancer.

“If you set a goal, you can make it happen!” Mitchard says.