

# 'You're never too old to love'

## Romantic comedy 'Mixed Emotions' to seduce Coaster Theatre audiences

When we first meet Herman Lewis and Christine Millman in "Mixed Emotions" — Richard Baer's play that runs at the Coaster Theatre Playhouse through May 24 — both characters are living in the harsh glare of personal tragedy. Herman lost his wife three years ago, and Christine her husband only one year ago.

The couples knew each other well, spent much of their time together and even traveled together during their friendship of more than 30 years. Now only the two widowed friends remain.

Then, Christine, tired of living by herself in the apartment she shared with her husband, is preparing to move from New York City to Florida. And, over the course of 18 hours, Herman desperately tries to change her mind.

However, "Mixed Emotions" is not a pathos-driven plunge into grief and loss but a light romantic comedy about two people cast into a new phase of life and the choices they make to honor themselves and their departed loved ones.

With more time behind them than ahead of them, Herman and Christine flirt with the possibility of a courtship, even as they may be saying their last goodbye.

### Old-fashioned romantics

Like the best romantic comedies with a poignant edge, "Mixed Emotions" is a "roller coaster ride," said the director, Susi Brown, who has worked with the Coaster on and off since the 1970s. "We have highs and lows, and it's bittersweet in some place, and it's slightly shocking in some places."

Shocking? Well, yes, the notion of "randy old people" talking about sex is still quite shocking to some viewers, said Sheila Shaffer, who plays Christine and has been with the Coaster since 2002.

Herman, played by Donald Conner, is "looking at his options at this point in life, and he's trying to 'grab while the grabbing is

good,'" said Conner, a 14-year Coaster veteran, quoting his character.

Though Christine is a family-oriented "recovering Catholic" with a classically Catholic guilt complex, and Herman a money-headed businessman less likely to express himself in emotional terms, both are old-fashioned romantics. And they're both wondering how — and whether — to jump back into the dating game after so many years, Shaffer said.

It's not uncommon for friends who have lost significant others to become an item, said Patrick Lathrop, the Coaster's executive director. "I think it really happens quite often," he said.

"It's kind of natural to gravitate toward people you already know," Shaffer said. "Whether it turns romantically or not, there's still that draw to each other because of, at least, companionship and friendship."

Longtime friends, after all, have "already seen the worst of each other and the best of each other, really," she said.

And, in Herman and Christine's case, they have helped each other through the stages of grief while learning to "look to the future, not to the past," as Herman puts it. For if they act as if they lost everything when they lost their spouses, they might as well be dead, too.

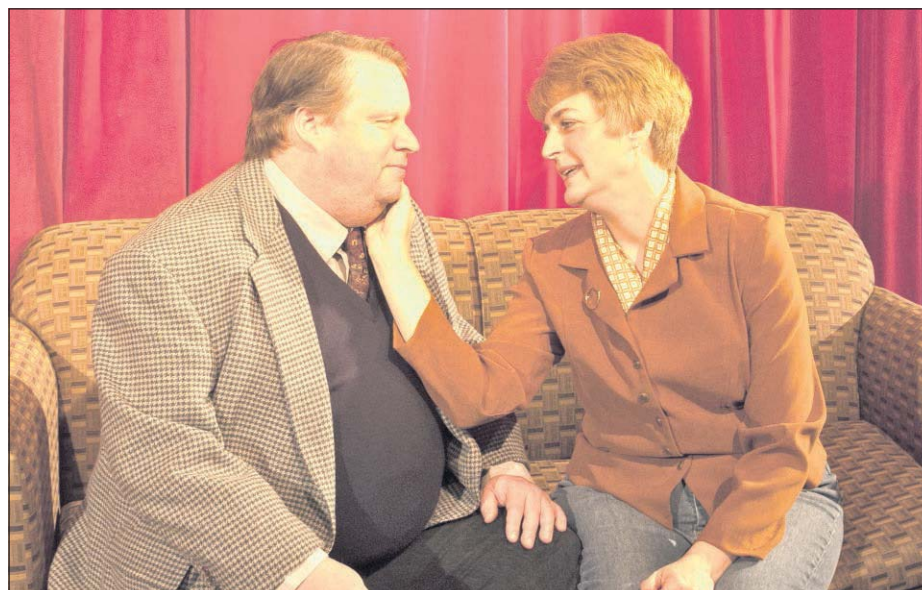
### While there's still time

"Mixed Emotions" will inspire nods of empathy and recognition, especially from audience members who have lost spouses, Shaffer said.

"There is that period of adjustment, first of all, that you have to get used to being on your own, and then you have to decide what's next," she said. "And when you get to a certain age, it's like, well, you'd better decide soon, you know?"

Shaffer is speaking from personal experience. She lost her husband, Ben, to cancer almost four years ago and didn't feel comfortable with the idea of dating until recently, she said.

Both are old-fashioned romantics. And they're both wondering how — and whether — to jump back into the dating game after so many years.



Submitted photo courtesy of the Coaster Theatre Playhouse

Donald Conner, left, and Sheila Shaffer star as Herman Lewis and Christine Millman, respectively, in the Coaster Theatre Playhouse's rendition of Richard Baer's play "Mixed Emotions," directed by Susi Brown.

"I didn't want to dishonor him ... I felt like if I dated someone and got involved with somebody else, that I was casting him aside somehow, and that's not the case," she said. "You have to learn to integrate what you had with that other person and make that a part of who you are, and know that that other person would want you to continue with your life and be happy."

When she read Baer's script, Shaffer thought, "This is very close to home," she said. "Which is why it's going to be such an exemplary performance," Lathrop said.

As two movers — played by Slab Slabinski and Cedar Braasch — empty Christine's apartment, "we see her grief emptying," Brown said. And as Christine talks about her memories, she begins to find a place for them.

The play, ultimately, is about letting go

and finding love while there's still time.

"You're never too old to change," Lathrop said.

And, Shaffer added, "You're never too old to love."

### 'Mixed Emotions'

7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 14

7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, May 15, 16, 22 and 23

3 p.m. Sunday, May 24

Coaster Theatre

108 N. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach

coastertheatre.com

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