

# Theater: Bridget Everett Hits 'Rock Bottom'

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**ROCK BOTTOM** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**JOE'S PUB AT THE PUBLIC THEATER**

If the current incarnation of actress Melissa McCarthy were to launch a cabaret act, it would surely resemble Bridget Everett's Rock Bottom at Joe's Pub. I say "current incarnation" because I've found McCarthy a very appealing, sweetly sexy actress in the past, mostly on the delightful series Gilmore Girls. But since hitting the jackpot with Bridesmaids, McCarthy has specialized in lowbrow, lowest common denominator frat boy humor, turning herself into the female equivalent of Chris Farley when we never even needed a male equivalent of Chris Farley. It's dismaying.

Quite similarly, Everett has been crafting a cabaret persona for many years that is resolutely "shocking" and "vulgar" and "out there," a brassy broad who will say and do anything, mainly for audiences that are ready for exactly that. The obvious touchstone is Bette Midler, though Midler of course was naturally funny and knew outrageous behavior worked best when it wasn't your default setting. Instead Everett leaps onstage, lifting her dress and displaying her panties or her titties in the first few minutes of this act as if it's the craziest, most out there thing in the world. She continues in that vein for the next 90 minutes.

Offended? Only by the lack of imagination. I would love to have been outraged but nothing came close here; you can't really offend jaded New Yorkers when they're cheering you on and laughing at every reference to genitalia. Couple that with a string of dismayingly unfunny songs co-written by Everett with high-powered talent like Marc Shaiman, Scott Wittman and Adam Horowitz and a whole lot of banal audience interaction and you've got Rock Bottom.

Most songs can be summed up by their titles: "Tell Me (Does This Dick Make My Ass Look Big?)," "Put Your Dick Away," "Eat It" and "Titties" ("You've got them mouse trap titties/ Put 'em in the air/ You've got them Tic Tac titties/ Put 'em in the air.") Happy relief is found in the very few serious numbers. "Why Don't You Kiss Me" for example has a retro vibe (unfortunately interrupted by comic interludes) and "I'll Take You Home" while lyrically shaky has a strong melody and let's Everett display her vocal power to good effect. (The clip below is from an earlier performance at Joe's Pub, not the current show.)

Happily, Rock Bottom also managed to get creatively tasteless at one point with a cover of Pat Boone's anti-abortion masterpiece "Let Me Live." True, the heavy lifting there is done by Boone, who had no idea how campily nutty his song was. But Everett turns it into an amusingly out-there duet with Cole Escola. (It even managed to genuinely offend one couple: when Escola leaned against a woman in the crowd, she cringed backward at the prospect of touching a cabaret singer and ran out a side door moments later with her date. Success!)

But those were the exceptions. The novelty numbers -- which is what the majority of her songs were -- fell utterly flat for me. Novelty numbers are notoriously hard to write, though Shaiman and Wittman have delivered their fair share for TV awards shows and on Broadway, such as their hilarious classic "A Big Black Lady Stops The Show" for Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me. And the Beastie Boys delivered wry satire from the very start of their careers, even if some fans of Licensed To Ill may not have been in on the joke. ("Girls" is a spoof, people!)

Yet song after song here was lacking both in melody and lyrics. Most of the night, simply cursing or teasing an

audience member or joking about sleeping with a British celebrity was as clever as it got. Further, Everett's banter was awkward, with her stumbling over several scripted passages in the show and failing to improvise interestingly when something unexpected happened.

For example, she muffed a section that began to build some power where Everett asked an audience member about his childhood, wondering if he remembers when his mom would offer to take the kids for a drive just before blacking out. "Remember that? Remember that?" It began to take shape into a memorable moment...but then petered out.

Later, when one guy told her he'd come to the show with his sister, she was thrown for a loop and just said okay, okay, okay. It might have inspired a riff on sibling love, on incest being a game the whole family can enjoy, on Flowers In The Attic or a million other things that sprang to mind when he said it. But she settled for just repeating the fact over a couple of times. (He did prove very game during one extended interaction later in the show, improvising himself to good effect.)

It's depressing to go to an "outrageous" show and be bored. Certainly, the adoring audience was not and ate it up by and large. She's clearly sweet at heart and just wants to let loose and have some fun. More power to her. But crass doesn't equal clever or every comedian who cursed would be George Carlin. They're not.

If Everett wants to be our Bette Midler, she needs to learn a lot more about shaping a story and pacing and contrasting moments of vulgarity with moments that aren't vulgar, so you know, the vulgarity can seem surprising. Less faux "wildness" and more heart would be welcome too. "Wind Beneath My Wings" was the end of the Bette Midler who would mock the high and mighty. But a sentimental streak might be the start of where Everett truly belongs.

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