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Review: 'Squeeze Box'

At The Marsh in San Francisco through June 29

Randolph's autobiographical story is really one of faith. When we first meet the likeable, slightly goofy Ann, she's working a minimum-wage job at a shelter for mentally ill homeless women in Santa Monica. The job is wearing on her, and she's beginning to feel like no matter how hard she works or how much she cares, she is not really helping the women. Her life, she concludes, has ceased to progress. She has failed to move forward and, as a result, has lost the faith that once made her want to become a saint and provide "encouragement, hope and love to those most easily forgotten."

One of the ways Ann hopes to get some life back into her life is through a personal ad on Match.com. She's hoping to find a rugged man with a love for Brahms. The rugged look, it seems, really turns her on. "Maybe that's why I'm attracted to homeless men," she says.

The man she finds is Harold, a musician and weekend hiker who speaks (and feels) in a monotone. But when Ann finds out what instrument Harold plays, it's very nearly a deal breaker. He plays the accordion, the squeeze box and the soundtrack to many a beery oompah-pah Saturday night.

Nothing in Randolph's tale is quite what you expect. There's a whole lot of frank sex talk (especially from Brandy, the paranoid schizophrenic crack-head whore who lives in the shelter), and Ann's downward spiral is quite dramatic (though the 75-minute show has loads of humor). The characters come and go, with some making more of an impression than others. The hippie-ish Shoshanna is there to represent liberal hypocrisy, while Julie, the shelter counselor just arrived from Christ the King Salvation Center, is a Bible thumper in the worst possible sense and couldn't be more insensitive to the world around her.

Though the character of Irene, a new resident at the shelter, only makes a brief appearance, she has tremendous impact. Randolph pulls her hair up into a crude bun, twists her malleable face into something akin to a pain mask and strums the guitar while Irene sings of her marital woe. It's a funny song that turns incredibly poignant. Irene, like Ann, has lost her faith in a big way.

