

Solange De Santis

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The Story of My Life needs a few more chapters

By Solange De Santis

It is ironic and unfortunate that the creators of an intimate musical called *The Story of My Life*, in its world premiere engagement at CanStage in Toronto, neglected several narrative essentials. Had composer/lyricist Neil Bartram and book writer Brian Hill, who are New York-based Canadians, remembered that compelling stories need conflict and resolution and varied the emotional temperature of the show, they could have produced a memorable look at friendship. As it is, this *Story* is missing a few chapters.

The one-act, two-character evening stars Brent Carver, fresh from his stint as Gandalf in Toronto's *Lord of the Rings*, as neurotic writer Thomas. The *Life* of the title would seem to be that of his childhood friend, Alvin, sturdily played by Jeffrey Kuhn, since we never get as much information about Tom and his family as we do about Alvin.

The one hour, 45-minute story begins with a device that's been used before – Thomas returns to his hometown to eulogize Alvin. Though Thomas is now a best-selling author, he struggles to analyze in words the essence of Alvin's life and the meaning of a friendship that soared when they were boys and young adults but fell apart as they grew older. In fact, they hadn't spoken for ten years before Alvin jumped off the town bridge to his death.

Alvin appears and coaches Tom – "Say I always ate my brussels sprouts" – and in the opening song, *The Story of My Life*, becomes child, adult and memory, an engaging metaphysical and musical feat. But right off the bat, there is a lot of talking and not enough dramatizing, as Tom tells us too much about the story we're waiting to see unfold – "My life hurtled forward; his didn't budge."

As the memories crowd in, the men become boys again. Alvin's mom died when he was six and he was raised by his father, who ran the town bookshop. In elementary school, quiet Tom is drawn to quirky Alvin, who, in the first grade, dresses up as the ghost of his mother, which is either poignant or just plain weird.

Alvin tells Tom, "My mother met her angel and I met you," which seems to indicate the two men are destined to be more than just friends. Angels are a recurring image, as Tom recalls the boys used to make snow angels "every Christmas Eve," (*every* Christmas Eve?). The film *It's A Wonderful Life* and the character Clarence, an angel come to earth, are invoked many times. When the boys are teenagers, the Angel Falls (yes) bridge from which Alvin leaped is where Alvin suddenly kisses Tom on the lips.

Tom heads to the big city to pursue his career, carrying a load of guilt over leaving Alvin in Angel Falls to look after his ailing father and run the bookshop. Tom gets engaged to a woman, then breaks it off and the story now seems to be that of a conflicted gay man.

But it goes no further. Tom remains single. We never learn why Al committed suicide. Tom even confronts Al's spirit and asks, "Why did you kiss me? What happened, Al?"

Al responds, "You'll never know. Just accept that pieces might not fit." While this may be true of life, it's hardly satisfying for an audience. In the end, the memories of Christmas Eves bring Tom joy and the snowflakes of those childhood winters are compared to angels, which is one icky-sweet reference too many.

There are glimpses of interesting conflict along the way – Tom momentarily mocks Alvin's obsession with *It's A Wonderful Life* and urges Alvin to "be normal if you want to keep being my best friend" – but the overall mood is stuck in one gear - wistful.

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The songs that are memorable are due more to Bartram's lyrics than his noodling piano score, conducted and played here by Marek Norman along with woodwind and cello accompaniment. "Mrs. Remington" gives Kuhn a charming patter song about an elementary school teacher. "1876" is Thomas' passionate hymn to the magic of books, one that will raise a sigh from any writer, and "I Like It Here" gives Carver the opportunity to inhabit the guilty, pained tension of a breakup dinner.

Glenn Davidson's set – tons of sparkly snow, a podium, a chair, a Hallmark-card town in the distance and a wall fragment that opens to create a corner of the bookstore – doesn't give director Michael Bush, a veteran of the Manhattan Theatre Club, much playing area for his actors. Carver, whose face registers emotion like ripples move across a pond, plays Tom with worried intensity, but the script gives him no real reason as to why he should feel so responsible for his friend. Kuhn moves easily and affectingly from the fey Alvin's boyhood to adulthood and back. A technical issue affecting the show on opening night was static from a speaker that caused Carver to step out of character and stop the show for a couple of minutes until it was fixed. *The Story of My Life* is less simple to mend.

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