

Ladies who dare to put their sex lives on the stage at 82

Like so much good comedy, D'yan Forest's wisecracking show is borderline tragedy, writes **Mike Wade**

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In a dusty auditorium, really the classroom of an old school, the audience is laughing nervously as they are held spellbound by the extraordinary woman in front of them. For most of the show, tiny D'yan Forest, 82, has been teetering around the stage in a black outfit topped by a traditional French beret — except the hat is made of gold and finished with a model of the Eiffel Tower.

If she looks unusual, the song *Bi Bi Sexual* (to the tune of *Bye Bye Blackbird*) has taken the audience completely by surprise. Forest had previously professed her love only for men, but 45 minutes in and she's happy to announce she swings both ways.

"I'd do Jackie O or Jackie Gleason / Up in heaven, we could have a threesome," she warbles. "Be you femme or be you hunk / Grandma wants all your junk / I'll tell you why / Baby, I'm bi."

Nicholas Parsons, 92, may be the most famous oldie in town, but there is a solid contingent of elderly performers on this year's fringe.

Some actors, bored perhaps in retirement, have decided to revive a career; other performers are here to help in a show produced or performed by a son or a daughter.

Forest's show is notable, though, because she has decided to take her sex life centre stage. *A Broad Abroad!* is a classic fringe production, at one level bawdy, tuneful and funny, as she sings and wisecracks her hour upon the stage. But like so much good comedy, it's borderline tragedy, often poignant and bittersweet, touching on the sorrows that still dog Forest's life. You might wonder why she would make a show of her personal trauma and bring it all the way across the Atlantic.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" she asks, ensconced in the rough-and-ready changing room that might once have been a janitor's cupboard.

"My friends at the country club say: 'What you doing this for?' Look at me, I'm banging my head against the wall. But there is something in me, I love it. When people are laughing at me and listening to my sound, it gives me 'nachas' — that's Jewish — a feeling of such warmth. "It's funny. By now I could be dead. I have had cancer twice. The only thing missing is I haven't got a partner."

Born Diana Shulman in Newton, Massachusetts, Forest began her singing career after her marriage to Irwin Cohen failed. After a brief acquaintance with Paris in the 1950s, she returned to the city a decade later, acquiring a repertoire of 100 French songs along the way and discovering her sexuality.

Ordered home by her parents, she settled in Greenwich Village, New York, and changed her name to help her get work as a singer and musician in WASP-ish country clubs. She's branched out over the last decade, honing a comedy routine and developing a succession of shows: *I Married a Nun* was about her first female lover; another was entitled *My Pussy Is Purring Again*.

"That wasn't a good title — the gays didn't want to hear about it and neither did the grey-hairs," she declares. *A Broad Abroad!* she hopes can reach out to everyone.

A Broad Abroad! at Greenside, Infirmary Street, to Aug 27