



Beyond the battle

Men are from...

'Men Are From Mars – Women Are From Venus' comes to the Mendel Center on Friday night

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Erik Gullberg met director Mindy Cooper when he was cast in “Deployed,” a pop-rock musical set against the backdrop of a military base in Baghdad, Iraq, for The New York Musical Theatre Festival.

“She was just the most fluid and open collaborator I had ever worked with,” Gullberg says by phone from New York City. “The way she speaks about the language of movement and space, the way that she creates stories is just really joyful. I enjoyed every day being on set with her, and wanted to find a way to work with her again.”

Luckily for Gullberg, the feeling was mutual. Eight months after “Deployed” wrapped, he got a call from Cooper about another project.

“She said ‘I’m working on this play and I think you would be good for it. This is the material we are doing. Why don’t you send me a couple of videos and we’ll talk about it,’” Gullberg says. “They sent me a couple of the scripts they were doing and I rewrote it a little bit for me with niche jokes about ‘Star Wars’ and ‘The Incredible Hulk’ and some pieces more open to an audience that isn’t entirely filled with geeks. And that’s how it happened.”

Gullberg landed the starring role in the Cooper-directed touring production of the one-man Off-Broadway comedy “Men Are From Mars – Women Are From Venus Live,” which makes a Friday stop at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center

Mainstage Theatre. The fusion of theater, storytelling and stand-up – based on the New York Times best-selling book by John Gray – moves swiftly through a series of vignettes covering everything from love and marriage to inevitable differences between the sexes.

The 1993 book written by Gray, an author and relationship counselor, spent 121 weeks on the best-seller list. In it, Gray states that most common relationship problems between men and women are a result of fundamental psychological differences between the sexes, and the ways they respond to stress and stressful situations, which the author exemplifies by means of its eponymous metaphor.

“We wanted to make sure we did right by Dr. Gray and his audience,” Gullberg says. “But we talk so much about men are from Mars and women are from Venus, that a lot of my show is reconciling the two and bringing us all back down to Earth. We stripped it down to a guy who loves his family, even when they drive him crazy.”

Gullberg is the third actor to take the reins of the production since it debuted in the United States in 2013. He follows Matt Iseman, best known as the host of “American Ninja Warrior,” and most recently Peter Story, who led the show to its Off-Broadway success in New York.

“One of the things that’s so unusual about this production is that each of us have been allowed to craft the show around ourselves and our personality and our humor,” says Gullberg, who joined the production in August and began performing



ABOVE AND ON THE COVER: Erik Gullberg stars in the one-man Off-Broadway comedy “Men Are From Mars – Women Are From Venus Live.”

in September. “The core of the show stays the same, the message is the same, but it’s very, very tailored to the person on stage performing it.”

Gullberg, who grew up in Fairfield, Conn., a place he describes as “a wonderful place to grow up but an even better

place to escape,” discovered his penchant for acting in high school.

“I had played football and was good at it, but it never really brought me any joy,” he says. “With a little encouragement, I auditioned for the school musical, and I got a part playing the bad guy my freshmen year.

of the sexes



Photo provided

rom Mars – Women Are From Venus Live,” based on John Gray’s 1992 best-selling book about the

The acting bug bit me so hard. It was this, it had to be this. Nothing else made me feel this way. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else.”

He studied acting, particularly the works of William Shakespeare and other classical material, at New York University, and

filled his life outside the classroom studying people as a bartender and absorbing as much film and theater as he could.

After college, Gullberg did regional theater with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, was Prince Charming on a Disney cruise, and landed the role in “Deployed,”

among others.

He says “Men Are From Mars – Women Are From Venus Live” is different than anything he has ever done before.

“I’ve been acting almost my entire life, but I had never done stand-up before, and I had never been on stage entirely by myself,” Gullberg says. “The first thing I did when I got the role was surround myself with one-man performance and stand-up. A lot of it is the craft and mechanics of building a joke, which is very useful, but that disappears the second you walk out on stage and have to make a roomful of people laugh.”

So Gullberg started with one person – Emily, his wife of 10 years, who is the main subject of much of his material.

“Let me preface this by saying that I have found an incredible woman who loves me very much,” Gullberg says. “She’s tremendously patient. But I imagine that all of us have moments where we can’t believe that the person that we love and live with just can’t get out of the house on time. It’s these every day things that happen to us, the touchstones of living with and loving a beautiful and terrifying human being, that make it into the show.”

When asked for another example, Gullberg launches into a recent discussion he had with Emily.

“Oh, she did this to me the other day, and I’ve been talking about it in the show forever,” he says. “She walked over to her closet, and says ‘Erik, I have nothing to wear.’ I walked over to this same closet, and all I see is a closet full of clothes. ... What I have to realize is that everything in there is a different emotion; it’s a different mood. It’s not just a piece of clothing, otherwise maybe we could slim down our closet a bit.”

Gullberg quickly adds the show is much more than bits

IF YOU GO

What: “Men Are From Mars – Women Are From Venus Live”

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$50, \$25 with 50 percent off code VENUS50 online or in person

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

centered around “things women do that drive men crazy.”

“Hopefully, by the end of the show people will be elbowing each other and saying ‘Honey, that’s just like you,’” he says, “but more specifically it’s about how to love your partner better and more completely through all of the stresses that life piles on top of you.”

“I was fortunate enough to find an incredible woman who thought that I was funny and even moderately handsome. She’s also boundlessly patient and encouraging. This show is a reminder of how lucky I am to have found her.”

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Women are from... 

