

Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, NY  
*I Am Barbie*, by Walton Beacham; Directed by Rob Maitner  
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

***“Actually, I’m great with the image – but there’s not a lot of depth.”***

Symbols of the ‘60s. That is what concerns us at the play “I Am Barbie” now playing in Catskill, New York at Bridge Street Theatre. Barbie, Ken, G.I. Joe dominate the stage for 90 minutes and their creators, Ruth Handler and Jack Ryan put in their necessary appearances along with other characters they created in that period. Barbie, in the play, is turning sixty and her means of celebration is to talk frankly about getting to that age without actually aging. She is as lovely, she says, as when she was created. Played charmingly by Olivia Sargent she is the perennial innocent that Barbie, big-chested, slim-waisted as she is, is but her nostalgia shows us her other side, her well-aged humanity. She has had 139 careers, none of them very successful. She has flirted with Ken, with Blaine, with G.I. Joe and others but she has never committed to any one of them. She is the eternal flirt with none of the gravitas, or even dirt under her fingernails, that a real woman might have developed. She can’t believe she’s sixty and neither can we.



Amanda Ferguson as Ruth; Photo: John Sowle

Sargent’s success has been singular: she IS Barbie. In the course of this ninety minute play she obsesses over her identity, her reality and her importance in a world that can’t forget her or ignore her. Sadly it also can’t hold her. She was created sixty years earlier to serve as a symbol for girls of what a woman should be. She was created with a voluminous chest without nipples, but otherwise anatomically correct. The one career that has been denied her is motherhood.

That is because her “mother,” Ruth, has never truly been a mother either. She is a step-mother, a foster mother, presumably *with* nipples. Ruth Handler actually had two children, a daughter named Barbara for whom Barbie was named and a son who evolved into Ken. Amanda Ferguson plays Ruth wonderfully well and gives us the many sides of the woman who created Mattel, the company that marketed Barbie. Later in the play Ruth discusses her second major invention the breast simulation for women with mastectomies. Ferguson also plays Danica Patrick, an auto racer, who has the best scene with Barbie, and the only one that really gives the play to another character. In this scene Ferguson is nothing short of brilliant.



Max Kantor as Ken; Photo: John Sowle

Max Kantor plays Ken, G.I Joe, Cowboy and all the other men in the play including Jack Ryan. This young actor is extremely talented; he makes all of his characters as different as possible and each one comes across as real and well-defined. This is a man with a future.



Olivia Sargent as Barbie;  
Photo: John Sowle

The fourth member of the Bridge Street company is Natalie Arneson who plays She-Ra, Skipper, Britney Spears and a waitress. Her work is the equal of Ferguson's, and they work well together when Ferguson plays an aging, MS patient who was the Mickey Mouse Club star Annette Funicello (another great interpretation).

Author Walton Beacham has crafted an unusual play with its first half, in particular, crafted around a series of monologues. He writes real people who sound like themselves and not like one another which is an art. Director Rob Maitner has given the play a vitality that keeps it alive and interesting to an audience that may not care about Barbie. Less than half way through the evening you realize that you really do care about this doll and her effect on the world, especially if it is the world you grew up in.

John Soble's set is great and his lighting is fine. The costumes designed by Michelle Rogers are almost as funny as the things these characters say and do. The wigs by Nellie Gambo of Good Hair W&MC do a lot to give us the characters. It is a fine production.

This run is a short one, but worth traveling to Catskill to see. It entertains and amuses and at the same time it elevates the period of the sixties into a new and different reality. Barbie, no matter how old she is, lives in her era and reflects on our time from her special point of view. Odd things come to you as you think about what you're hearing and watching and, apparently, big breasts never do go out of fashion.

+ 09/02/2023 +

**I Am Barbie** plays at Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through September 10. For information and tickets go to [bridgest.org](http://bridgest.org).