

Sunday Entertainment, August 27, 2006

'Women on Fire' offers vibrant tableaux of ladies come alive

Theatre Review

Reviewer: Kitty Montgomery

WILL the real playwright Irene O'Garden please stand up? Could we pull the author of "Woman on Fire" out of the lineup of a dozen characters three actresses inhabit in the living poetry of a production directed by Wallace Norman for the Woodstock Fringe at Byrdcliffe?

In truth, O'Garden is a renowned playwright whose work has been anthologized with Eleanor Roosevelt's and Maya Angelou's, and who does stand up reading as one of America's "exceptional poets." Ever a woman on fire, been-there done-that photographer, Trude raves to a poker buddy about a fire at her studio and the total loss of a life time's work. The conflagrations she laments, occurred while she was off on assignment "shooting contemporary women, which as you know is something I'd really like to do!"

This aside- you can almost see the W.C. Field cigar dangling from Trude/O'Garden's lips- puts the house on notice. Whatever we are about to witness will probably not be your ordinary feminist paean to what ever righteous "disses" woman may be indignant about in our day.

Sho' Nuff. In O'Garden's vibrant tableaux of ladies come alive, through confidences to their priest, some stranger in a foot doctor waiting room, a friend at a campfire, the audience shares intimate acquaintance with a collective of unique and vulnerable mortals, wrestling, dodging, sometimes triumphing over and even celebrating the human condition as women. They all disturb our empathy, and all spring from the author's heart.

Do not be amazed by the tour-de-force turns of character, by actresses, Asta Hansen, Nicola Sheara, and Noni Connor. Multiple schizophrenia is what the acting biz is all about.

Whichever borough of New York Hansen's upwardly mobile Aunt Miriam has escaped from

cupidity remains the "fixe" of her life, as she advises a niece suffering her husband's infidelity on the means of libido restoration via the autoerotic act of shopping. This may be the only satiric bit in O'Garden's bag of flaming arrows, but Hansen is subtly brilliantly funny.

Sheara, who gives us the no-so-repentant, bitter Irish daughter, Eileen, and, on the other side, a dying mother, gripped by a wine-induced terminal illness, who tape-records some last confessions and jibes to a successful writer/ daughter- is elegant, arrogant and raucous, in a revelation of the playwright's Celtic-Chinese mystic side, as ex-advertising exec clover. We love Sheara best, however, as the punk Gothic poet Zatz, making her stand in a huge generic bookstore. What a gas, to stand astride a display table exercising instant literary criticism with a fulminating can of spray paint.

Conner's monologues as Midwestern mama Fern; Rita, urban career girl at a campfire, wistful in sharing memories of the intentional termination of her temporarily joyous pregnancy; and the clogging country girl ecstatic Jordy, are all poignant. She's a knockout though, as the construction mama Kalisha, mother of twins with a cement jones, Studs Terkel's "working" and this tough, sweet woman merge in a gutsy, tell-it-like-it-is statement that carries like documentary truth and uplifts like gospel.

Conflagrations of hearth, coal stove, etc., occur against Robert McBroom's flaming backset. Fire's color spectrum is picked in costumes by Raul Aktanov, whose touches illuminate the uniqueness of each character, as they enhance the naturalness of play, Musical selections by Tom Desisto segueing the audience from scene to scene, and setting the mood for monologues, give the piece, overall, an insidious inspirational wrap.