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## ECHOES IN THE MIND

In *Three Tall Women* Edward Albee portrays the pathos of a woman who has lost her way

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.

**F**rom the moment Edward Albee's theater first hit the U.S. stage, critics probed its pith with solicitous pens, delighting in the psycho-sexual machinations that lie beneath the surface of every exposed relationship. His plays offer up a fertile study of characters suffering from a host of complexes and disorders, and critics have either attempted to explain away or amplify the perversion that exists there.

### Theater

In answer to these analytical investigations of his work, Albee has countered with disclaimers that the content of his plays should not be examined against the backdrop of his biography. He contests that he is a playwright who points to the psychological principles that govern us all, in spite of the conspicuous influences of his homosexuality and familial estrangement.

Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning play of 1994, *Three Tall Women*, has undergone the same sort of critical scrutiny to which his previous efforts have been subjected. However, in this piece there is no mistaking a slice of Albee's personal history.

In this thoughtful production directed by Glyn O'Malley for Portland Repertory Theatre, we are pulled into the psyche of Albee's mother—with whom he had a rocky relationship—to share his catharsis in what is doubtless his most earnest exploration of the human condition.

The second act presents us with an almost entirely different play. Shifting the narrative mode, Albee pushes us deeper into the woman's psychological sanctuary to reveal perspectives of her existence at three distinct stages. The actors who play three different characters in the first act, become three voices of the dying woman's interior dialogue in the second. Moving away from the first act's more conventionally linear construction, Act 2 is the real marrow of the play, for it is here that we discover the playwright's vivid examination of the elemental attendance of mortality upon our lives. As the three aspects meet and discuss the life that they live from each vantage point, Albee tells us plenty about the way they love and live and learn to forgive, but he also shows how all of our lives are defined by the selfsame qualities.

All three performers shine in the second act. Ann Swanson is decidedly insolent in an inexperienced, 26-year-old sort of way. The embodiment of youthful idealism, she opposes the notion of growing older, refusing to accept a life that falls anywhere short of her perfectly contrived dreams. The quinquagenarian depiction, delivered effectively by Linda Williams Janke, is a riveting expression of a woman who has been beaten down by her life's accumulating disappointments. As she falls into fits of rage, we become acutely aware of her uncontrollable anger toward her estranged son.

Jayne Heller is exquisitely matriarchal, with an awareness that soars above the others' by virtue of the fact that she has lived through the two younger points of view. Heller's performance of the only



Ann Swanson (left), Linda Williams Janke and Jayne Heller

Albee sets his play in the bedroom of an ailing dowager who is awaiting the visit of her wayward son. She soothes her anxiousness by recalling pleasant to painful memories, and producing a rather histrionic display of tearful outbursts for her attendant and an unsympathetic attorney, both women. Throughout the first act we observe this peevish, overbearing woman who teeters on the edge of sanity (understandable for a woman who has lived through 90 inharmonious years). Jayne Heller, in a marvelous characterization, brilliantly captures the childlike pathos of a woman who has completely lost her way in the world. The two supporting characters, played by Linda Williams Janke and Ann Swanson, are left largely undeveloped. Their involvement in the first act seems merely to work as a buffer and catalyst to the volatility of the aging woman. Actually, the only apparent purpose of the initial act is to reveal to us the life of a crumbling woman on her deathbed contrasted with the presence of two younger women who are removed from personal ruminations upon their own demise.

character who makes an appearance in both acts was the pearl of the production, and was so believable that I found myself wishing that the character was available for cocktails after the show.

The son, having failed to make an appearance in the first act, makes his way to his mother's bedside and remains in his muted position throughout most of the second act. Acting with unflinching concentration, John O'Brien proves that dialogue is not required for a character to effectively communicate.

*Three Tall Women* is a perfect season opener for Portland Rep., as it offers a reflective setting for an evening of autumnal contemplation. Edward Albee has created a play rooted in his own sense experiences, that has at its heart a reflection of who we really are.

*Three Tall Women* plays at 7 pm Tuesday-Thursday, 8 pm Friday and Saturday, and 2 and 7 pm Sunday through Nov. 16 at Portland Repertory Theatre, 2 World Trade Center, 25 SW Salmon St. Tickets are \$20-\$30; call 224-4491.