

How To Make A Woman

by John Michael Sophos

How to Make a Woman at the Caravan Theatre, is a delightful mixture of improvisation and scripted dialogue, pantomime and spoken word, dealing with the various roles women are forced to play in our male dominated society. The result is a kind of fairy tale that takes the five actors on a romp through Never-Never Land, thereby making the reality of what the play is saying more palatable to the viewer.

The play consists of five characters: two men, two women, and a mannequin, an invention of the two men, the perfect woman, a robot that is completely controlled by them. Yet at various times throughout the play, the five characters change personalities, as the play threads its way through and around the life of a woman, from childhood to death, in marriage and childbirth, and, of course, the ever constant search to find herself and free herself from the ever-present male domination.

Constantly dealing with reality, sometimes a bit exaggerated, the play is a successful blending of reality and fantasy. Many of the scenes deal with the characters on a human level, but with a flash of light and a "bzzt" from the mannequin, the human becomes a mechanical being and the setting a strange mixture of the present and the future. It is almost as if the play were saying, "Watch out, society, or this is how you will end up."

The basic script from which the total evolved was written by Stan Edelson, whose wife, Bobbi, is the director. Together, they and their actors have developed a delightful piece of contemporary theatre. The direction is sharp, smooth, and just subtle enough to heighten every point in the play.

How To Make A Woman is the first show I have seen where lighting successfully becomes an integral part of the play, and almost takes the form of an additional character.

The five actors were all marvelous. On more than one occasion, the completely personable characterizations brought audience response to direct character questions. It is a credit to the actor when the audience member can communicate directly with a character without dissolving into giggles. Without detracting from the excellent performances turned in by their peers, I would like to single out Barbara Fleischman, as the more naive and most easily dominated of the two girls, and Ann Barclay, as the mannequin, as being especially effective.

How To Make A Woman will run on Friday and Saturday nights through November 1. Whether or not you agree with the idea of male dominance, the play is well worth the trip to Cambridge.

A panel discussion is held after each performance, so that audience and cast can air their views on the statement of the play.

Stylistically, "How To Make A Woman" at the Caravan Theater, Cambridge, is an exciting, radically different theatrical triumph. It deserves more attention than it will probably get on its small, barren stage at the Harvard-Epworth Methodist Church.

In its totality it's extremely effective, fresh, and contemporary. A relentless, ironic and fiendishly accurate thrust to the emotional gut with stabs of pure genius in its use of theatricals.

There are scenes in this play where the manipulation of patterned light and movement offer a dichotomy of visual perception so unusual and powerful that the senses, bewildered, turn to something deeper and unnamed within each of us for comprehension. To find even a moment of theater so pure, so awesome, and so completely captivating is so rare that, for this alone, "How To Make A Woman" demands to be seen. It continues through May 24.

True Theater

To gently bypass the senses and strike at that part of our inner self which is beyond conceptualization, where the impact can never be completely expressed in the rational thought, much less the written word; to abstract to the point of overcoming the traditional limitation of expressionistic theater, the essentially static visual quality of a single stage . . . this is the stuff of the theater of tomorrow.

(Oh ye of little faith that think that all that might be called theater can be captured on celluloid or trapped in a tube; See and repent!)

In its conception this work is brilliant, the acting is always good and sometimes superb. Director Bobbi Edelson (the wifely half of the Mr. and Mrs. team that codirect the Caravan Theater) has molded her five actors into dramatic collage with a finesse that accents her social statement with a powerful expressionistic sense of emotional perception and with a witty, ironic sense of the comic.

"How to Make A Woman" is an original production at the Caravan, the product of Mrs. Edelson's most fertile imagination interplaying with the improvisational talents of her acting group.

The theme is expressed in the title, taken literally. The basic premise is that society so structures the role of the female that the emergence of an independent, freely-developed individual is nearly, if not completely, precluded.

Yet this is more than a feminist condemnation of the oppressive male; for while first the family and then the male dominated society trample the free nature of the woman and at least partially subjugate it, it's evident that the trappers too have been shaped; they're like machines with the dials set. Perhaps the deeper statement is again a comment on the absurdity of the human condition, where everyone has a "dial" that others inevitably tamper with and which the individual himself can never protect.

Linking Past and Present

In structure the play is episodic, linking the past and present, dimensions known and dimensions unknown, real unreality and unreal reality through the visually spectacular transition scene — already noted enthusiastically — that gives one the sensation of sinking or falling while grasping for another awareness.

Aesthetically Sculptured

Triumph

Look for more in this play than the inexplicable intellectual dilemmas that the now predominant Theater of the Absurd offers, however; for "How To Make A Woman" brings in the emotional completeness of the expressionistic style with its precise yet graceful focus on movement.

The Caravan Theater is known for its accent on motion, the human movement of the actors and the abstract movement of its lighting effects. The direction and acting are based on the premise that movement is a deeper, less structured, yet more complete mode of communication. With their skill in entwining their unusual lighting effects and the stylistic actions of their actors, the Caravan will be winning new adherents to their rather

radical philosophies with "How To Make A Woman."

Taking a piece of the cinema's traditional freedom with historical chronology, this play fades in and out; thrusting and jabbing at the facades of human beings it finds commonplace, in both the world we see about us and in the chasms of the imagination. Each scene heightens the impact, the confusion, the revelation.

The initial scene becomes the departure point; a dress boutique where men design the clothing, the personality, the facade-of-the-day for their clients. Here we get the initial note of one of the central themes. The female is degraded to a body, a thing to be played with, distorted. The women who enter here may accept the distortion offered or they may reject it, it matters little. They are merely deciding whether to keep their old distortion or accept a new facade, as valueless as the old. They are less real than the shop mannequin, who greets them with scorn.

The play begins to distort here, searching into the childhood, the infancy, and beyond into the womb for the cause of this distortion; if we find cause upon cause, it's because all is a distortion.

Delightful Particulars

Particularly delightful is a slashing little piece of satire on parents "growing up" their daughter from infancy — the child, filled out with a tremendous characterization by Leilani Johnson, doesn't develop, she is developed, grown as in a flower box, to be trimmed and pruned and mechanically and chemically jumped over the difficult phases.

In a spin-off from conceptual reality, we find ourselves dropping with a character into another dimension of reality, an intensely personal and solitary expressionistic existence where one woman tries to search out what is real and what is not in a shadowy world of fluctuating values and mechanical beings.

In one fascinating scene, the lone woman wanders amid a human penny arcade, choosing between the games, choosing her role, choosing her man. With a mood set by flux of light and lyrical mechanical chants from revolving mannequin-like men and women, she wanders between them like a delighted child trying

to decide where she'll invest her nickel. Sara Screech, here one of the mannequin figures, is beautiful as the mechanical hawker. Miss Screech plays the completely structured woman throughout most of the drama, contrasting her inanimate dryness against those who are in the process of being structures. She is superb!

Aili Singer, who is hilarious in a deliciously wicked piece of farce on pregnancy, rises to solid acting in a face-off with her dependent husband. Refusing even to take out the garbage, he leaves everything to her; but when in wrath she seizes control of all their affairs, he can assert himself only by taking out the garbage.

In the final scene of the play, Miss Singer, the woman who has only moments before recoiled in horror as she realized that she was assuming the heretofore male role of the oppressor as she grasped control of her own and her husband's life, is able to walk away from the rigidly-structured roles that have entombed the others. Having been manipulated and then, in rebellion, becoming a manipulator, she has become aware, and this awareness has given her the perspective to step outside the structured context, to be real unto herself.

This final scene, as Miss Singer is able to stand aside and objectively reject all the facades around her, has the material for a solidly dramatic assertion of self.

The fact that this opportunity is thrown away in some meaningless prattle and childish waves, is the only real disappointment in the production. With the talent displayed throughout the work, one expects more of Director Edelson.

Of the five characters who held the stage steadily for nearly two hours, the three actresses were consistently excellent. The two men, Joel Polinsky and Joe Volpe, hold generally less demanding roles, but in several scenes we might hope for more of the imaginative and less of the trite in both their material and their interpretation, particularly in the designer scenes. Both men, however, rise to a challenge on occasion, particularly Volpe in his treatment of the dependent husband-who-wanted-a-mother and again in his delightful scene as the satyr-tempter, the Wolf.

The Harvard Independent

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THEATER

Making Women At Caravan

By CRAIG NIEUWENHUYSE

On occasion those committed to social change express themselves with the eloquence of theatrically valid tragedy. Articulate advocates of female liberation have achieved such an expression in their startlingly original production billed as *How to Make a Woman* at the Caravan Theatre.

Anyone interested in the relation of drama with social change will see a rare example of unpretentious and almost unnoticeable didacticism.

The three women in the play all fall victim to "female" roles created for them by society. Each learns in her own way the deep frustration of being treated as an object when relegated to the subordinate position that women traditionally assume in our culture.

By a skillful alternation of styles and roles, these women experience with the two men in the play all of the roles offered to women in our society. While two of them acquiesce, the third refuses to accept less than what she intuitively believes that life should allow her.

She breaks out of the bonds restraining her and exits, hurt, frustrated, and alone. She achieves a tragic dimension in her ruthless honesty, experimentation, and courage to face her discovery that she does not fit into any of society's roles. Her tragedy becomes that of each member of the audience by means of the style, characterizations, and structure of the play.

How to Make a Woman

resembles *Comedia* in its highly improvised but precise action, inclusion of the audience -- in a discussion with the cast at the end of the play -- and its use of stock characters (though the Caravan actors keep changing roles and delight in non- and semi-verbal communication).



Barbara Fleischmann questions David Klein's advances in Caravan Theater's satire, *HOW TO MAKE A WOMAN*

The girl resembles all of us, in that she is conscious of the roles she plays and yet is somehow more confident (or is it afraid?) within them. And in the discussion following the play, it becomes clear that "women's liberation" describes a tragedy of rootlessness and rolelessness that many share today.

The play itself ends with no assertion of any positive action on the girl's parts, or any suggestion of how she will endure her fate. When she makes her exit the play is over.

Just what the girl does after she leaves society's roles troubles me. The obvious answer of learning and teaching to love all over again begs the question, *How?*

Women's liberation wishes to band together as a vanguard of the change. The girl in the play has tried everything else.

An exceedingly dedicated, disciplined and imaginative performance further enhances this play, which is also free of the stuffiness and posh too often associated with theatre today. A quest to isolate the

THE

'THURSDAY'

M.I.T. PRESS

ARTS

How to Make a Woman

How to Make a Woman, at the Caravan Theatre, is the most significant piece of new and exciting theatre this critic has seen in Boston. The product of a series of improvisations developed by the cast over the past two years, the play deals coherently and persuasively with the necessity of "Women's Liberation" via a superb and sensitive dramatic presentation.

Women's liberation, as such, is a relatively new phenomenon. Skepticism about it is widespread among the unacquainted. Its arguments, however, are both cogent and indisputable, especially in regard to manifestations of the oppression of women in American society. To present specifics of the case here would to it the double injustice of distortion and oversimplification. Indeed, I am not even sure that I, as a man, am qualified or entitled to delineate the arguments. In any case, the Caravan Theatre presents them with an inescapability and personal challenge I won't dare attempt to match. The program heading, a quotation by Laurel Limpus, expresses the idea as well as is possible or desirable here:

"When I speak of female liberation, I mean liberation from the myths that have enslaved and confined women in their own minds as well as in the minds of others; I don't mean liberation from men. Men and women are virtually oppressed by a culture and a heritage that mutilates the relationships possible between them."

Apart from its substantive power, yet also inextricably bound up with it, the play itself is a moving and profound theatrical experience. The totality and intensity of that experience is impossible to take apart or describe adequately. Time dissolves and surges back. Symbols are created and smashed. The audience becomes part of the play and then, with a single light change, the wall of theatrical illusion is instantly reconstructed. Light, voices, physical mime and motion all merge to form an evocative procession of multiple images of unavoidable personal involvement and impact. In a way it is like film in flesh and blood and with the strength of both media.

The play is a highly complex web of time, places, and characterizations. Its internal unity and complexity keeps a constant stream of references, symbols, and relationships before the audience. Particularly noticeable is the skill of the cast at physical generalization and mime of objects, persons, and actions. Revolving doors, giving birth, shooting guns, or making love are all characterized with re-

markably concrete abstractness. Sexual metaphors and symbols are among the most effective—explicit and evocative with far more breadth than genital specifics could ever give—for the metaphors capture the emotional and psychological as well as the physical.

Improvisational theatre is a dangerous genre. It can easily get caught up in itself, or lose spontaneity as a show runs on and the cast begins to "act" rather than recreate and experiences its earlier improvisations. The Caravan Theatre troupe, however, shows that the potential dangers are clearly exceeded by the rewards. The resultant statement must surely be as highly gratifying and significant for the creator-cast as it is for the audience.

Too many superlatives are undoubtedly boring. If you go, more are unnecessary. If not, you've missed the point anyway. Call ahead for reservations. The run has been extended for two more weeks, but the house has been consistently sold out. The Caravan Theatre is located in the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church.

How to Make a Woman is an exquisite dramatic presentation of our society's unmaking of both women and men. It's a good place to start putting ourselves back together, after we recover from finding ourselves so apart.

--Bob Reckman

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Free Press-May 7-20

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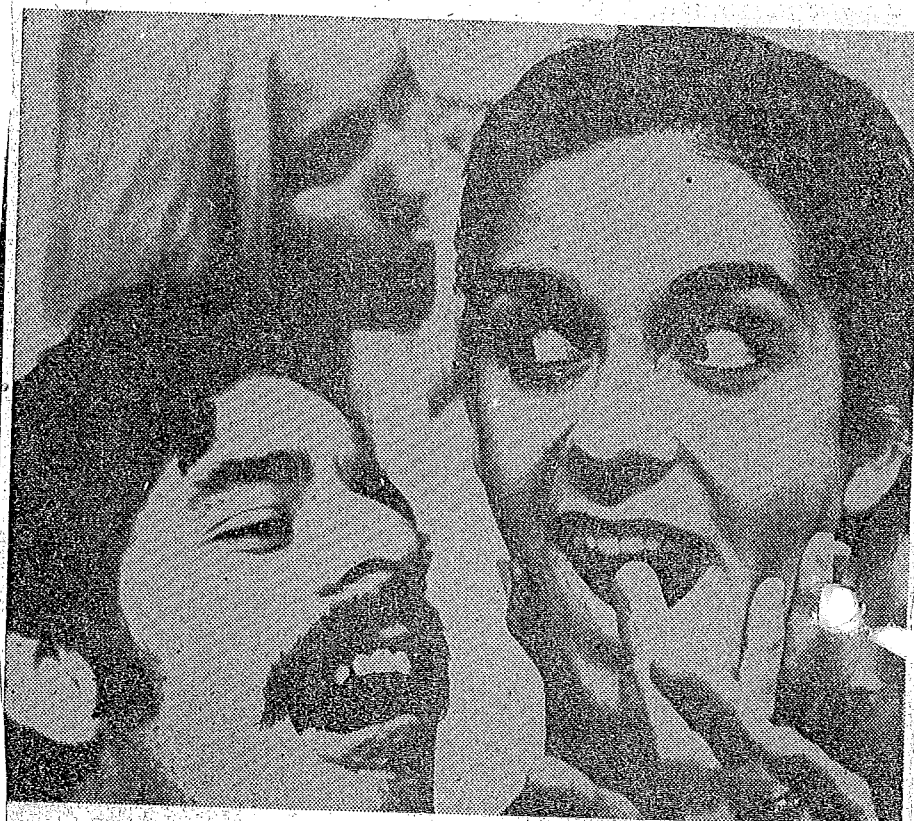
How To Make a Woman
Caravan Theatre, 17 April, 1969

The Caravan Theatre has created an artistic theatrical movement, outlines a universal tale, interpreted a contemporary philosophy, and offered a possible solution in their latest original production. Concerned with woman, and thereby deliberately emphasizing her point of view, the basic script from which the improvisations arose was written, surprisingly, by the director's husband, Stan Edelson.

"How to Make a Woman" is almost as complex as the female herself. It weaves in and out of childhood and adulthood, womanhood, marriage, and childbirth. It empathizes with security and loss, search and discovery, madness and ecstasy. Emphasis is packed on our society being male structured, male controlled. Attempts at adjustments and compromises in male-female relationships are shown complex, sometimes hopeless. Female self-liberation is offered as one possible solution.

The above themes are but partial interpretations. The play is presented as a misty collage, with occasional sudden bursts, and only the individual viewer can decide whether to stop at the surface images or to delve into the more subtle undercurrents.

The presentation is one of supple movements and clever devices, and the acting is superb. The result is something like a fairy tale created for adults, an artistic and socially stimulating success.



SCENE FROM the Caravan Theater's "How to Make a Woman," one of several Off-Off Broadway productions in Boston.

AFTER DARK

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In Boston

At the Caravan Theatre a boutique is the mis-en-scène for an original drama, *How to Make a Woman*. Trying to find the perfect dress for the perfect woman leads to a re-evaluation of the male-female roles, and the outcome of the search for a perfect dress is the "non-dress." The play, revolutionary in its aim, grew out of improvisation and was then written in script form by Caravan's director Stan Edelson. It will run through June.

The Boys in the Band has been cre-