

Caravan reexamines feminism

by Jerry Spindel

How to Make A Woman, currently being presented by the Caravan Theatre at the Harvard Epworth Methodist Church, is at once a major theatrical experience and an exasperatingly (because deliberately) limited view of modern society.

In a series of encounters (the play is so organic and fluid that one can hardly refer to them as pieces or scenes) the descent of woman is explored from restrained infancy to repressed adolescence to absolutely hog-tied adulthood. The choices women face are found to be largely illusory, little more than tightly circumscribed roles in our male dominated society. What's missing for the American woman is an individualized life in which she can express herself fully.

What's also missing in this play is intellectual validity. Anyone with even a smattering of college psych will find veritable tableau vivants from their textbooks in this play. And there is still the smell of textbooks in this play. And there is still the smell of textbooks about them; arguments and demonstrations convincing only when lifted from their subtle and complicated contexts. If the set roles of mother and homemaker are constraining, are they less so than those of father and breadwinner?

The Caravan people are the first to admit to the narrowness of their focus, but this fails to help very much. The didacticism of the play—blatantly presented in expository dialogues and shamelessly transparent metaphors (Aili: "This dress doesn't fit." Mary: "It fits all of us.")—will enthrall the type of person who inks exclamation points into the margins of library books, who feels his individuality threatened by ball-point pens, plastics, cellophane packaging, and the substitution of numbers for letters in telephone exchanges.

But now I'm oversimplifying things. The Caravan Theatre is the most over-explained theatre in the Boston area. Their intentions have been written up in newspaper articles and discussed at length in symposia. Their intentions are stated on their programs and, appropriately lettered and boxed, could serve as the group's logo. What isn't given enough attention is the amazing theatrical skill and virtuosity of the Edelsons and their company: Barbara Fleischman, who can depict the Seven Ages of Woman by changing her expression; Aili Singer, who hilariously mimes pregnancy from conception to delivery; Anne Barclay, who is a work of pop art; Joseph Volpe, Feiffer's Huey drawn by Daumier; and David Starr Klein, who can do anything the others can do. And vice-versa. I don't like to make lists, and I don't like to go overboard in my praise, but even now, a full two days after I've seen their performances, I can hardly say enough about their creative accomplishment.

"How To Make A Woman" was developed and formalized over a two year period from actors' improvisations, and a major share of the credit for its success must go to Bobbi Edelson, who directs the show. The dialogue is good and right and funny when it's there, but truly awesome is the way the actors move, the noises they make, the choreography of the whole piece, the use and re-use of props, in which a piece of fabric is one moment a garment, the next a chain, the next a wall. It is only now, with the advent of Off-Off Broadway, the Polish Lab Theatre, and the like that academic critics, myself included, are beginning to get the re-education and vocabulary necessary to appreciate the gifts of the new theatre.

The Harvard Independent

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 emotions of our day is underway at the Caravan Theatre, subtle but relentless,