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Out of Focus

Focus on Me directed by Bobbi Ausubel at the Harvard-Epworth Church through
December 25

By **Barbara Fried**

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ANY fool can tell you that politics and art won't mix--and will substantiate his claim by pointing to precisely those instances in which they don't mix. There is no shortage of examples to finger--movies like *Carnal Knowledge* or Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, which have thrown both concerns together on the set, only to have them slug it out until one of them stands triumphant with its foot in the other's mouth.

But as the rest of us know, there is a wealth of evidence to the contrary. A work like *Three-penny Opera* or *Lucia* so completely interfuses dramatic and political concerns that it would not occur to us to separate their claims on our attention. It should not surprise us to find that when a play's political tension is built upon the same internal logic that propels its dramatic development, each is made more vivid by the resonance of the other. This can only happen if the playwright's chief concern is to write something, not write *about* something. If

it is about. But it doesn't stand alone, then it fails not only itself, but its self-proclaimed cause as well.

The Caravan Theater, now in its tenth season in Cambridge, has handled this difficult task in the past with more dexterity than most other local groups. In its best work over the past three years--*How To Make A Woman* and *Suppose I Fall*--it has probed the complex interface between the sexes, a subject not likely to be soon exhausted. In both productions, the company put before us a situation decked out in gay attire, and then slowly stripped it down to its unaccommodated truth, while the audience watched with painful recognition. The actors brought something to life on their stage--and the fact that its life touched ours with more than coincidental frequency was acutely clear. We did not need a road map to find the bridge between the two, nor were we handed one.

So with this fine history behind them, it is a joyless task to report that *Focus On Me*, Caravan's new production that opened last week, just doesn't work. The play was written by the company's director, Bobbi Ausubel, under a grant given by the Radcliffe Institute. It is *about* (using the word advisedly) a woman filmmaker, Toni, trying to create a film prototype of a strong woman. She parades before us a succession of archetype images (amazon and mother), discarding each in turn as insufficient. He finally settles on one that is supposed to be a synthesis of the best of our male and female stereotypes--a breadwinner who can cry.

The central, irreducible flaw in *Focus* is that nothing really happens. The only movement in the play is polemical, and that is more lateral than ascendant. It resembles what was called in grade school parlance a Vegetable Play: "I am a carrot... I am a string bean... I am a cranshaw melon." The characters announce their problems rather than portray them, and then move to renounce them, rather than resolve them. When Toni's friend Nina announces "I have confidence, I'm wild, I'm radiant, I'm magnificent" one wants to grab her and shake her, shouting "Be it, don't say it." Nina talks incessantly about her daughter, who we are to believe is the most important person in her life--and yet we never see her daughter on stage, let alone the interplay between the two. We likewise never meet Toni's husband, though he figures mightily in the conversation. Of the relationships portrayed on stage, only that between Toni and her young daughter approaches authenticity--perhaps because the child

Much of the dialogue reads like a litany of liberation. Lines like "Why can't you be like other mothers" and "Don't go to college--get a job as a clerk, you'll meet a nice man..." wash over us with the indistinct familiarity of a TV ad we've heard a hundred times. It is obvious why this is not good theater: the characters are merely pasteboard stand-ins for the absent playwright. And while it may be less obvious, it is equally true that neither is this good politics. Rather than bring us closer to the truth, the play helps us keep it at arm's length. The thrust it makes into our lives is precisely that which we are most adept at parrying: the verbal scrutiny of motive and effect.

WE would rather do almost anything than face the grimy undersides of our private lives. Our sleeves are stuffed with ready explanations and sound (self-serving) analyses designed to ward off that unwelcome sight. As fast as one is yanked away from us, we produce another. In fact, many in the audience probably can play that game with more finesse than can Ausubel, the author of *Focus*--producing a result quite opposite from the one desired. Rather than putting us on edge, the play allows us to sit back with unwarranted complacency, feeling that however tenuous may be our grasp on our situation, it is at least more firm than that which the play displays.

It is possible that a better cast could have read more dramatic tension between the lines. The one glimmer of hope in that direction comes from an outstanding job by Lin Kosy as a fantasy-spinning child. She takes a potentially pedestrian part and makes it fly, in a technically superb performance. Her fifteen-minute sequence is almost worth seeing for its own sake. But the remainder of the cast is undistinguished. Joanna Temple accentuates the already brittle, shrill tenor of Toni's role. Sheila Greene as Nina does little to pry her part loose from its rather uninspired box. Only Joan Trachtman as Toni's mother seems unhappily tethered to a very limited script. One senses she could do a great deal more with the part, given a little room in which to move.

THEATER has a unique capacity to touch our best-protected secrets. When it does not try to fight, cajole, or debate us--but rather to beguile us with the notion that it has an existence separate from our own--then we will watch the circumstance unfold with sight unmarred by vested interests. And having wrought its image clearly in our eye, the play can then trust to our restless minds to draw the inescapable analogies to our own experience. The Caravan Theater has tanned this power with extraordinary effectiveness in the past, and

into the theater of political overturn. While it may be true that female is beautiful, the slogan is cold comfort in the long winter of our discontent.

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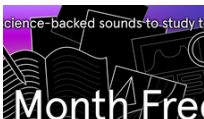
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