

Spectator Magazine

August 14, 1997

Solomon Isaacs' *Fallen Angels*

AS I STEPPED OUTSIDE AFTER ACT II of *Fallen Angels* to enjoy the cool night air, I was prepared to write a glowing review of Solomon Isaacs, Ltd.'s production. And then I saw the third act.

Fallen Angels, a little-known play by Noël Coward, is the story of two women, Jane and Julia, who after five or so years of marriage, come face-to-face with their Achilles heel: a passionate lover they each knew in Italy. Of course, we don't meet the lover, Maurice, right away. Instead, we

see Jane and Julia's angst over meeting the only man who made "soul shattering" love to them.

Right from the start, Kathleen Hill Graves and Lynda Clark, as Jane and Julia, reminded me of the British comedy *Absolutely Fabulous* — the same frenetic tempo with better clothes. I was taken by the actors' fantastic physical humor and sense of timing.

I was especially impressed by Helen Hagan, who plays Saunders, Julia's maid. Hagan's previous stint in improvisational comedy paid off here; her movements, accent and manner were perfectly over the top, just as I'd expect from a sitting room comedy.

The first two acts showed the best of these three actresses. Except for a brief moment in the beginning when we meet the husbands, the action is all about the women (and the elusive Maurice). I wish the play had ended there.

The third act attempts to tie up the loose ends by bringing the husbands (David Britt and John McElwee) and eventually Maurice (David Ring) into the fray. But whether it was weak acting, slipping British accents, or inadequate writing, the exciting action stopped cold in its tracks. I began to notice things I shouldn't have; the beautiful white-on-white set looked cracked and faded, and the lights that had perfectly captured the actresses had unnecessary shadows.

While I applaud Solomon Isaacs Ltd. for not hauling out the shows we've all seen a thousand times, I wish they had chosen something that ended with the bang it began with. My advice? Catch the first two acts, then take off for drinks. Rest assured, all comes out well in the end. *KD*

Spectator Magazine

March 7, 1998

THEATRE

By Kimberley Debus

***Criminal Hearts* opens at Thompson Theatre**

A WOMAN LIES SLEEPING ON A mattress in the middle of a room. Through an open window a sheath of moonlight barely illuminates the piles of pizza boxes and empty soda cans strewn about the floor. Suddenly, through the window crawls a slender woman in black, looking for all the world like Emma Peel in *The Avengers*. She's there to rob the place, but what she finds instead is an empty room and a neurotic woman who has "stress allergies."

This is how *Criminal Hearts* opens, the touching comedy that serves as the debut of Lynda Clark Productions. The script tells the story of two women and their unlikely friendship. Lynda Clark plays Bo, a hustler hardened by the streets. Lies roll easily off Bo's tongue; she's rough and abrasive and takes advantage of everyone who crosses her path. Ata, portrayed by Kate Finlayson, is Bo's polar opposite: successful, middle-class, well-educated. And yet at this moment Ata's life is in shambles; her husband Wib has left her and cleaned out both the apartment and, it seems, her life. Ata is a true victim: finding herself used and allowing herself to be used.

Yes, this is a comedy. The beauty of Jane Martin's script is in the recognition of the humor in even the most dismal of circumstances. The language is real and witty and tells the story without burdensome exposition. And Martin's observations on life in the '90s are right on target.

This play was a perfect choice, for it not only is a well-written and well-conceived comedy but also is a perfect showcase for the talent of Clark and Finlayson. If you had described the characters to me and then told me the cast, I would have put Clark as Ata and Finlayson as Bo; the casting against type was the best thing that could have happened. Clark and Finlayson stretch themselves to explore new and exciting characters, revealing their true talent. The work of these women engrossed me totally and immediately; they absorbed me right into the world of the play.

The two men in this production also did star-quality work. Sean Rivenbark, who plays Bo's sidekick Robbie, was tremendous. And Eric Carl as the wonderfully smarmy Wib was engaging and extraordinary. Kudos go also to director Terri L. Janney, who crafted a strong and well-paced piece.

If it sounds like I'm raving, I am. This production is incredibly well cast, well conceived, well designed and well performed. Perhaps the only thing bad about *Criminal Hearts* is that it has a short run. This show and Lynda Clark Productions deserve a long, packed-to-the-gills run. My advice: Drop all your plans for this weekend and go see this play. It just doesn't get much better than this. ▼

THEATRE

By Kimberley Debus

Perihelion's Phoenix Rising

A NEW GENRE OF THEATRE IS MAKING its presence known in the Triangle: the healing play. Like any new genre, it's difficult to say exactly what makes a show a healing play, but we are seeing more of them, from Manbite's Dog Theater's *Walking Miracles*, which dealt with incest, to Meredith College's *A Piece of My Heart*, which told the story of women in Vietnam. Perihelion Theatre Company is becoming the home of the healing play and *Phoenix Rising*, their latest production, is nothing if not therapeutic.

Written and directed by Karen Traut, Perihelion's founder, the story revolves around Merrily and Sweetheart, two sisters who are chronologically in their 50s but thirty-something in "spirit age." Through a series of stories told at a pool party in Phoenix, we learn about their abusive father, their hard-working but distant mother and their sometimes-resented younger brother Jules. We hear how finding their father's family changed their lives and how Sweetheart's daughter Roberta is "back East" telling the family's stories in her act. And we learn about Big Ma, who really raised the girls and gave them the affection they craved.

This is the story of a family — Traut's family, to be exact. But it is also the story of a thousand other families in the 20th century. Many of us can look at our mothers and grandmothers and see families torn apart by the Depression, cold war era mothers fighting tooth and nail to keep their own families in tact and the children of those families making new, more internal choices as they make their way.

As far as telling this story and offering a "healing" of soul and spirit, *Phoenix Rising* does a fine job. The discussion that followed this fairly short play offered a chance to recognize the journey Merrily and Sweetheart make in their relationships with each other and their world. However, this show lacked an incredible amount of polish and technical mastery.

Anna Weinstein and Courtney McEachern, as Merrily and Sweetheart, rushed out of the gate and didn't give the audience a chance to breathe, much less really understand what was going on. Emotional changes come out of nowhere and didn't seem well motivated. Transitions between the past and the present were unclear; I'm sure they tried to make some transitions through lighting changes, but instead the lights were distracting and poorly designed. And the occasional appearance of Mother (Chrissy Fiorilli), chronologically 75 but 17 in spirit, was poorly defined, poorly interwoven and poorly lit.

This show is not for everyone; it is appropriate, however, if you want to think and want to heal. Don't expect a technical marvel or a polished performance, but you can expect a heart-felt production by this caring theatre company.

Spectator Magazine
March 21, 1998

Shut Up, Mother! Mrs. Klein at Playmakers

IF YOU HAVE EVER WONDERED IF IT is possible to over-analyze something, stop by the Paul Green Theatre and catch Playmakers' production of *Mrs. Klein*. Based on the life of Melanie Klein, one of the "mothers of psychoanalysis," Nicholas Wright's play explores the nature of maternal love in Freudian terms.

As the play opens, we meet Mrs. Klein, a German Jew living in 1934 London. She is abrupt, sharp and terribly demanding on Paula, another analyst whom she hardly knows. Mrs. Klein is concerned that she isn't dreaming; "I'm usually an active dreamer, but the show's been canceled," she remarks. Much of her unnatural calm is due to the death of her son Hans, yet much of her attention is devoted to analyzing Paula's every move with harshly inquisitive statements. When Mrs. Klein's daughter Melitta, also an analyst, appears, the room fills up with egos, super-egos and a handful of dead relatives. The three dive into the maelstrom of intellectualizing each other's thoughts, statements, needs and wants, with everything — whether it should or not — coming back to either sex or mother. For example, when Melitta and her mother become embroiled over the joint ownership of their car, Melitta exclaims, "I promise you it is not a penis; it is a 1927 Sunbeam!"

But what happens? What is the plot, you ask? That's hard to say. *Mrs. Klein* is certainly about ideas and character, not action. And while I appreciate plays about ideas, I did not appreciate this one. Perhaps it's my own aversion to Freudian psychology — although I don't think I'm alone; as we left the theatre I heard one gentleman humorously remark, "This makes me want to go home and choke mother." I don't mind going to theatre to think, to consider, to examine. But I do mind a play that crushes every idea to death without resolution. *Mrs. Klein* is not a healing play. Sure, it's about trying to heal, but it doesn't heal. It's much more about self-absorption, intellectualized emotion and symbolic rudeness.

I must not let you think the production itself is bad; the set, including beautiful parquet floors, is a masterpiece by designer William Barclay. The actresses — Susanne Wasson as Mrs. Klein, Drew Richardson as Paula and Elizabeth Heflin as Melitta — did a fine job with the material they were given. But the material is not good and director André Ernotte made unusual choices, including some pauses you could drive a train through (and the audience would have been glad for the distraction). I can't recommend this one unless you are fascinated by the Freudian psychoanalytical process and how it affects the personal lives of those analysts. *Mrs. Klein* left me confused, exhausted — and I'm glad I'm not in therapy. ▼

COMING ATTRACTIONS

by Kimberley Debus

Meredith Performs Stages *A Piece of My Heart*

LEE WILSON IS THANKFUL THAT someone finally remembers the ladies. A Vietnam veteran, Wilson has heard people say pointblank: "No women served in Vietnam." Wilson knows better, as do the nearly 5000 women who served there from 1965 to 1974. And now, a group of women at Meredith College know better, thanks to their participation in Meredith Performs' production of *A Piece of My Heart*.

The play, written by Shirley Lauro, tells the stories of six women who served in the Vietnam War. Each character is based on a real person, whose story is told in Keith Walker's book *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women Who Served in Vietnam*. Each actress read Walker's profiles of their characters. "I feel closer and also more responsible to this woman I'm portraying," says Sara Rashkin, who plays an Army nurse. "Understanding her reactions haven't made the difference, they are the difference."

Historical authenticity is an important aspect of Meredith's production. Although none of the actresses were alive during the Vietnam War, their parents' lives were formed by Vietnam. Actor David Britt and director Susan G. Reid were young children during the war and have no memories of it. They must rely on the memories of others for authenticity.

The "others" include Lee Wilson, who helped form the organization North Carolina Veterans, Inc. Wilson, who arrived in Vietnam the night of the Tet Offensive, was able to share the horrors of her experience, like the nightly sounds of gunfire and, most of all, the smell — a combination of "jet fuel, urine and feces." Wilson also shared the joys — the good friends she made and the way the servicemen treated her. "They treated all of us 'round-eyes' with incredible respect, almost like china dolls." Pete Hendricks, a former fighter pilot, echoed this sentiment when he spoke to the cast. "I remember guys standing in lines for hours just to get to speak to a round-eye for fifteen seconds."

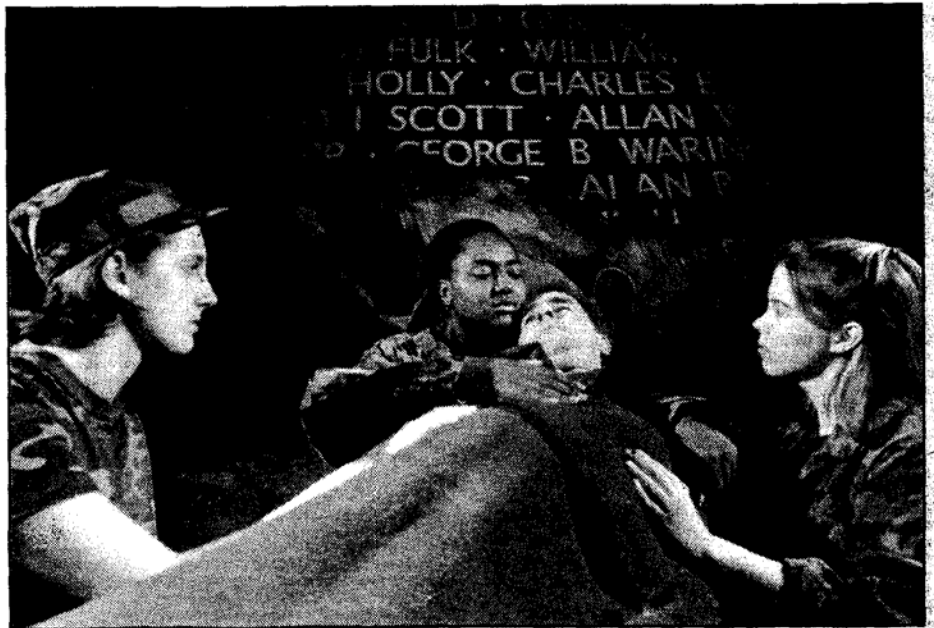
Listening to Hendricks speak made an incredible difference to his daughter Holly, who plays a USO singer in this production. "I used to be afraid to ask him about Vietnam, because I didn't know anything about the war," she says. "Now, I know enough about it to ask him ques-

tions, and I think we're even closer."

Each actress has sought authenticity for her role through the Walker profiles, the conversations with Wilson and Hendricks and by personalizing some of the experiences. Phyllis Gay, who plays an intelligence officer, has become more aware of how loud noises might affect a vet. "I have begun to react to trays being dropped in the dining hall as though guns were being fired," Gay says. Others have built "memories" of sights and sounds through videotapes and photographs.

Most of all, however, the cast is both terrified and excited about the prospect of Vietnam vets in the audience. Corie Berkemeyer knows that they can't ever really know how it felt and is afraid that as hard as they are working for authenticity, they "can't carry it off." Heather Wilcox is worried about portraying the "feelings of the real women" and coming off artificial. Rashkin is nervous about "recreating some situations as it was for them," but hopes that this will be part of their healing process.

Lee Wilson and Pete Hendricks are already feeling the healing aspects. "Just to have people remember the good and the bad is a great thing," says Hendricks. Rashkin agrees. "We're glad to be able to say there's another generation that hasn't forgotten what you went through." ▼



A scene from Meredith Performs' *A Piece of My Heart*.

On the BOARDS

THEATRE

By Kimberley Debus & Lila Summer

From Substance to Style: Archipelago Theatre & Andrew Lloyd Webber

IN HIS BOOK *THE EMPTY SPACE*, Peter Brook takes a theoretical approach to what theatre means and how it is perceived in the world. He defines what he calls holy theatre as a theatrical experience that is sacred, where something has been transubstantiated, where people are spiritually changed.

Eulogy For A Warrior is holy theatre at its best. This production, created by

Archipelago for Manbites Dog's Other Voices Series, is staggeringly spiritual as it tells the story of war and rites of passage in America — and in particular, the rite that was Vietnam. Playwrights Ellen Hemphill and Nor Hall chose Vietnam as their focus, because, as they say: "That is the wound that is still unhealed in this country." *Eulogy For A Warrior* deals with the ways in which we raise our sons; for example, while initially excited to be doing the right thing and becoming a man, a soldier sent early to Vietnam remarks, "No one told me you had to fight to be a man." Even though American society did not initiate them, we still expected our young men to be men.

Hemphill and Hall don't forget the women who served in Vietnam, even though the government did. A nurse makes a familiar remark that the US didn't bother to count how many women served, but knew to the bullet how many guns and ammunitions we confiscated from the Vietcong.

Eulogy For A Warrior also deals with disillusionment: the loss of youth, the loss of faith in government, the loss of faith in your fellow man. As the soldiers come home, they find themselves unwelcome — facing no recognition for their rite of passage. They face the loss of love and the loss of self. They face the reality that "this war isn't behind me, it's within me."

I cannot say enough good things about this show. The patchwork of memories about Vietnam are masterfully sewn together in a quilt covered in allegory — the narrator, the amazing Tom Marriot, tells us of the "kingdom of water" and the "tall emperor across the sea" who would save this foreign kingdom. All cast members, in their roles as mother, sister, soldier or nurse, told the personal, intimate stories of everyman and everywoman with care and conviction. The music, created by Christopher Adler, used unsettling Vietnamese phrases and popular American riffs to evoke a haunting dissonance. Jan Chambers' set, complete with the ever-present bamboo and mud, created a spooky, other-worldly environment.

Eulogy For A Warrior is unquestionably a most poignant treatment of Vietnam; it is healing as it gives a space for "wounded warriors to roam this earth searching for someone to hear their tales."

The flip side of Brook's "holy theatre" is what he calls "deadly theatre." That's not as bad as it sounds; deadly theatre is not bad theater, it's simply entertainment. It changes nothing in the world, does not

evoke a spiritual change, does not challenge boundaries. Some deadly theatre is bad, but the best of deadly theatre is fabulous, wondrous, entertaining spectacle. *Phantom Of The Opera*, now playing at Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium, is indeed spectacle — in the first degree.

For the dozen of you who don't know *Phantom* (and until Friday night, I made it a baker's dozen), Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's show tells the story of a Parisian opera house and its inhabitants — the company who performs there and the Phantom, who haunts the house. It is a love story — Christine, a young opera singer, is torn between the handsome and charming Raoul and the haunting and soulful Phantom. It is also a ghost story: the Phantom, in his anger, causes mysterious accidents and drives young Christine nearly mad.

Most of all, it is a spectacle, an amazing, it-could-only-happen-on-Broadway kind of spectacle. The transformation of

an old, decrepit theater into a glimmering, living, masterpiece is breathtaking. The journey to the underground includes a stunning effect of candles in the water. And the chandelier — let's just say that it is a masterpiece in itself.

Beyond the spectacle and the romanticism of the story, however, lies a fairly unimaginative score and weak plot. I personally became disillusioned with Sir Andrew after the disastrous *Starlight Express*; I found his work to be repetitive, relying on stock characters and invented plot points — *deus ex machina* — to forward the story. The same is true in *Phantom*; there are the male and female ingenues, the spooky schoolmarm, the pompous dandy, the bumbling older man, the vain snob. Christine falls in love with Raoul, not because he does anything to win her, but because Sir Andrew needed the love interest to create tension. But most annoying to me was the fact that I kept hearing other shows; many of the Phantom's recitatives were borrowed from Pontius Pilate's songs in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (his line "damn you, curse you" sounds exactly like "die if you want to, you misguided martyr"), and "The Point of No Return" left me humming not that song, but "Close Every Door To Me" from *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Defenders of Sir Andrew will say that he has a signature style; I say it is unimaginative.

Despite the structural problems I have with *Phantom*, I cannot deny that I spent those three hours in a spell of wonder. This show is magnificent; from the gorgeous voices that carry full operatic melodies to the miles of fabric used on exquisite costumes to the breathtaking set design. If you are lucky enough to have tickets, you will enjoy this sumptuous spectacle. **KD**