

TheaterReview

'Sarah' a risk worth taking

By Jim Cavener

CITIZEN-TIMES CORRESPONDENT

SWANNANOA — Any one-person show is a great risk for a theater troupe. An untried new play with only one, regionally unknown actor is a greater risk. The phoenix-like Upstaged company, located in the new Swannanoa Playhouse alongside Interstate 40 at Exit #59, has taken the risk. And we are all the richer for it.

With just one performer it takes not only great skill and artistry on the part of that one, but it takes extraordinary material both well written and well directed to make for even a modicum of success. It helps if that material is based on the life of an historic figure who will capture the imagination of the potential audience. Still, such efforts fail more often than they succeed.

Success is in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder, but this been-around-the-block theater writer is beholden to and greatly appreciative of the splendid work of author Robert Cabell, director Peter McClean and interpreter/performer Louise Martin for giving Asheville area

theatergoers a pinnacle of theater art.

"I, Sarah ... The Divine" is simply one of the most riveting performances the area has seen. The audience is captured and held from the moment Martin eases on to the stage to establish her presence without a word spoken for a very long time. And what a presence she creates.

Sarah Bernhardt was the 19th century's most esteemed actress. One of the great stage personae of all time. Although she was French, this glimpse into her life is presented mostly in English, which Bernhardt spoke quite well. Consummate actress Louise Martin speaks her few fully French lines with an impeccable accent. Her French-accented English is totally delightful.

Creating an autobiographical two-hour monologue which tells a person's tale without the feel of soppy self-aggrandizement is no mean feat. Author Cabell meets the test. The writ-

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "I, Sarah ... The Divine" by Upstaged Productions

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Swannanoa Playhouse, 294 Patton Cove Road, Swannanoa

HOW MUCH: \$15 at the door, \$12 in advance at Malaprop's bookstore, 55 Haywood St.

INFORMATION: 271-9098

ing is near seamless, and few loose-ends dangle or need adjustment or amplification.

It is not easy to keep clear Bernhardt's various paramours, lovers, husbands and dalliances, but one feels the author has probably provided that material, and it went past too quickly to be absorbed. Most of the male intimates of Madame Sarah appear somehow to be related to the Emperor Napoleon: his surgeon, his bastard nephew, etc.

Please see SARAH on E25



IRA FOX PHOTO

Louise Martin stars in the one-woman play "I, Sarah ... The Divine," about the life of Sarah Bernhardt, the 19th century's most esteemed actress. The show is on stage at the Swannanoa Playhouse through Sunday.

SARAH: One-woman show delights with both acting and decoration

Continued from E24

There are immense amounts of humor in the writing. Bernhardt's mother was a noted courtesan and gold-digger, who was known to have "loved a man for all he's worth, and not minded when he left — as long as he left a LOT."

After Martin takes full control of the stage, the story begins to unfold with her lying on an ornate recamier chaise (her friend Oscar Wilde would have called it a "fainting couch") in the throes of death. Having begun at the end, the obligatory flashback takes us to her youth and through her long life until her death in 1923.

Having dealt with her demise at the start, the show ends in a

blaze of glory. Even the end of the first act has Madame Sarah clad in a triumphant tri-colored interior, black velvet cape, showing the red, white and blue when flung open and up. The same tricolor backlights her on the only undecorated part of the stage. Oscar Wilde, eat your heart out.

Easy to say that Martin, the only person in the cast, steals the show. But, she has fierce and able competition from the set decoration around her. If ever a stage was "dressed" to the nines, it is this one. Some five or six staging areas are mostly from Bernhardt's Paris apartment. Props are attributed to Patrick Graham. He gathered and distributed a fine array.

This dazzling display of Art

Nouveau, cum Persian, with a touch of Turkish to add to the mix, this almost blinding collection of crystal candlesticks and pewter goblets, gilt tables and jeweled chairs, lace shawls and satin gowns, pheasant feathers and mirrored screens, leather-bound volumes and silver-framed photos, velvet and velour, Lalique and leopard skin, embroidered robes and silken sashes, classical statuary and potted palms all contribute to a decorator's dream, or nightmare. This was the era of indulgence, a time of High Camp, before camp was known.

However, a couple of barren staging areas are behind the symbolic footlights, upon which Madame Sarah repairs to deliver snippets of several of her most

notable roles. These vignettes are each jewels in the revelation of what made Bernhardt such an icon for an age of flamboyance. Each set piece, with her standing, pacing or reclining, gives a glimpse into the magnetism of this almost mythic figure of the Western stage.

The audience has a problem being sure they should acknowledge these "performances" by the legendary thespian, when she finishes each tour de force. Of course, they should. The director needs, somehow, to cue the audience that they may display their appreciation of Bernhardt/Martin with abundant applause.

The other time this audience interchange could be enhanced is for Martin to remain in char-

acter at the end of the show — reserved, regally and magnanimously milking the thunderous applause of the, as yet, sadly small audiences who are brought so physically and emotionally close to Bernhardt and the greatness of theater history.

The power of this portrayal could be extended by holding us all — for yet another moment — in the thrall of the great Sarah. After that moment, Louise Martin can be herself, break into the friendly and warm smile, bow low and let us reward her for giving us this moving exposure to the life of a complex and compelling woman.

C'est Magnifique!

Jim Cavener writes about theater for the Citizen-Times. E-mail JimCavener@aol.com.