



Women on the Rocks

Michael Zettler

Viveca Lindfors in *I Am a Woman—A few props to define the feminine mind*.

by Barbara Mackay

Gigi and Lorelei still may be wooed with furs, diamonds, and champagne, but in many of New York's Off-Broadway theaters—from Greenwich Village garages to the prestigious Brooklyn Academy of Music—female characters no longer measure success in inches of mink. Yet even with the current interest in women's liberation, much of the drama that purports to be sympathetic still presents familiar stereotypes: woman as diaper-changer, dishwasher, office functionary, cook, or sex kitten. Presumably the intention of such caricatures is the exposure of male brutality and insensitivity. In fact, they only reduce a complex situation to a simplistic formula: All men are villains, and all women victims.

In a revival of Elaine May's *Not Enough Rope* at Broodje's Cafe Theater, a girl is preparing to hang herself. A

young man breaks down her locked door, not to keep the girl from killing herself, but to take back the rope she borrowed for her noose. The comedy gets steadily blacker until the lights fade out on the girl sobbing hopelessly, clutching her landlady's corpse.

The main character is again a suicidal woman in Diane Kagan's *High Time*, a short play produced by the WPA Theater, a back-room stage in New York's Bowery. Frustrated by loneliness and a meaningless job—pulling a huge brass handle on a nameless, dial-studded machine—she contemplates the “big jump” from her skyscraper office. Again a man happens along, a mountaineer who has conquered all the world's mountains and is reduced to climbing buildings. Concerned only with getting to the top, he ignores the girl's plea for some slight sign of human affection, and he climbs up as she plunges down.

Presumably, *High Time* and *Not Enough Rope* derive from the current interest in feminism. But neither one deals specifically with the problems of women as women. Both plays seem much more concerned with the fact that human

beings can't communicate. In the same way, Avra Petrides's and Diane Kagan's *On the Rocks* (also playing at the WPA Theater) would present no problem if the playbill had read, “Women! Men!” instead of “Women! Women!” It's a clever comic adaptation of the Prometheus story, in which Ms. Petrides, a gifted comedienne, slinks and lurches and writhes around the stage, a tortured would-be sculptress tied to a rock above an abyss. But her problem is more than physical: She's emotionally chained to the strutting, glutting bird that daily devours her liver. He's all she's got. But then, she's all he's got, and the play focuses on his problems (he's a bald-headed eagle with vertigo) as much as on hers. Finally, *On the Rocks* is just a witty dramatization of an old human, and not particularly female, dilemma: Some people can't live with or without each other.

Disquieting Muses, a recent presentation at the Theater at St. Clement's (in a midtown church), illustrates the basic problem again: It might just as easily have been about men's failure to come to terms with life. A “response to the suicides of women artists,” conceived and directed by Betsy Shevey, *Disquieting Muses* lumps together Marilyn Monroe, Virginia Woolf, Billie Holiday, Diane Arbus, Janis Joplin, Sylvia Plath, and Judy Garland. Each of the characters, except for Plath, is dressed identically in platinum-blond wigs and silver pasties. Each one goes through a series of monotonous rituals—being rejected by her parents, discovering art as an outlet for her frustrations, hiding her true feelings behind the artist's mask—and each ritual is followed by a standard chorus (“I am me,” “I am here,” “I am woman”). By the end, every move, every speech, every symbolic suicide is predictable. When the sensitive, vulnerable, loving self can't remain locked inside any longer, it destroys the outer professional shell: Billie Holiday covers herself with flowers and lies back to die, Janis Joplin swigs some gin and then collapses, Virginia Woolf covers herself with a blue sheet, representing the sea.

Even the set for *Disquieting Muses* promises more than it delivers. Cluttered with the stuff of woman's fantasies and nightmares—wedding gowns, dolls, baby carriages, grocery carts, an oven with two bruised legs protruding from it—the stage looks as though it could easily contain settings for seven different stories, instead of one story told seven times. But the really disquieting aspect of the pro-

Barbara Mackay, a recent graduate of the Yale Drama School's criticism program, currently teaches at Queens College.

duction is the disservice it does to these artists. It reduces their art to a compensation for pain, ignoring the fact that what made Joplin and Garland and Holiday great singers was precisely their ability to reflect extreme emotion, especially pain. Even worse, by making these seven women neurotic, schizophrenic children, searching for the love mommy and daddy never gave them, *Disquieting Muses* gives a simplistic analysis of their deaths. And, without adequate motivation, these women appear to have been supreme masochists, bent on self-destruction, instead of the gifted, creative, unique individuals they were.

Megan Terry's *Hothouse* verges on melodrama and ends with the incredible suggestion that when all else fails, a woman can run home to mama and get the only surefire remedies for heartache—mother love and booze. But *Hothouse* deserves attention for two reasons: First, it really is about women; and, second, it admits the complexity of sexual relationships. There are no clear villains and victims in Megan Terry's writing; men brutalize men and women use women.

Produced in the Circle Theater, a loft on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the play takes place in a house shared by grandmother, mother, and daughter. The paint is peeling off the walls, the plants are dying, the grass is full of weeds, and the women are alcoholics, perpetually losing their men. The main character is a loud, blowsy, buxom redhead, who shouts a lot about what brutes men are and drinks a lot to forget how much she misses them. While men are in the room, she dances, sings, flirts, and keeps up a continuous, one-woman floor show. Yet when she is with her daughter or mother, all the bravado and apparent self-confidence slip away and she becomes a pathetic, aging earth mother with no outlet for her lust or her tenderness.

Ms. Terry uses this contrast as evidence that woman is her own worst enemy; she acts like a plastic, unbreakable doll, then goes to pieces when she is treated like one. What *Hothouse* shows, among many other things, is one woman's realization that she has wasted her life in a useless race against wrinkles and bulges, dressing up and performing for an audience that finally doesn't care.

All of the plays mentioned so far show woman at the first level of self-awareness, waking up to her social and sexual victimization. In Viveca Lindfors's *I Am a Woman*, a traveling adaptation of writ-

ing by and about women, there are a few fleeting glimpses of women who are already fully awake and beginning to rebel against oppression, women determined to compete with men or to live without them.

However, the production as a whole is more concerned with showing the entire spectrum of feminine attitudes toward life than with making a case for



From *Disquieting Muses*

Woman's role as celebrated suicide.

women's liberation. And, as such, it is a perfect vehicle for Ms. Lindfors's virtuosity. She swirls onto the stage at the Theater in Space, wearing two capes, a purse, a hat, and a scarf—basic props that she combines to create forty distinct, colorful characters. She plays a romantic, adolescent Anne Frank describing her first kiss; Portia in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* vowing her undying love; a Vietnamese woman telling of American soldiers' brutality to Vietnamese women; and Marilyn Monroe explaining her desire for happiness, not money: "I just want to be wonderful." Yet, as Ms. Lindfors whips through her catalog of characters, there is a strong emotional undercurrent binding the varied images together, a suggestion that woman's main strength is her passivity. Most of the selections imply that she will continue to adapt to, rather than transform, society and that her primary objectives in life are marriage and children. Whether she is an unwed, pregnant girl without any way of supporting her child, an aging woman watching her beauty fade, a young girl aching for a perfect, passionate love, or an old mother mourn-

ing the death of her son, woman (as Ms. Lindfors sees her) is still primarily a loser, longing for the unattainable and bearing her burdens silently.

Only one recent production shows a woman designing her own life: the Cherry Lane Theater's *Dear Nobody*, co-authored by Terry Belanger and Jane Marla Robbins. Ironically, the play is based on the life and diaries of the novelist Fanny Burney, who's been dead for 134 years. Along with collaborating on the script, Ms. Robbins plays Fanny Burney, sketching episodes from her life as a teenage girl, a newly discovered novelist, an attendant to the queen at England's royal court, a wife, and a mother. She skillfully impersonates a variety of people whom Miss Burney knew and described in her journals: a hearty, earthy Samuel Johnson, a dapper Richard Brinsley Sheridan, various proper eighteenth-century ladies, and the notoriously improper Mme. de Staël. In the process, Ms. Robbins reveals Fanny Burney to be a witty, willful, unconventional woman who, in that decidedly anti-feminist time, managed to live and work as she pleased.

An increasing number of feminist drama groups and feminist playwrights are appearing all the time. They represent a broad range of political and sexual ideologies, involvement with the women's liberation movement, and dramatic technique. For example, the Westbeth Playwrights Feminist Collective works within a traditional theatrical structure. It consists of five women playwrights and hires directors, producers, actors, and technicians. The It's All Right to Be Woman Theater, on the other hand, is a true theater collective, which rejects the (supposedly masculine) notion of hierarchical organization in its very structure: There are no specified playwrights, directors, or stagehands.

Some groups—especially those who do improvisations or deal specifically with lesbianism—restrict attendance at certain performances to women, on the theory that men in an audience inhibit women's spontaneity. Most of the new feminist groups and independent playwrights are limited by lack of money or performance space, and as a result, their shows are few and far between. But given time and the new public interest in feminist theater, they may eventually provide a revised image of woman, proud of her sex and determined to solve her problems by some method other than suicide. □

Teacher's Pets

by Hollis Alpert

Off the South Carolina coast, if we're to take *Conrack* at face value, is a small island called Yamacraw, where there are few of the problems currently besetting town and city dwellers. No cars on the island, therefore no gas shortage. Too remote for drugs to be a problem, and crime not a concern because of the island's poverty and general backwardness. On the other hand, there are pristine ocean beaches, lush foliage, a variety of exotic blooms, and for most of the year the weather is bland and warm. So far as we can tell, there aren't even ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, or poisonous snakes to bother the few residents.

But *Conrack* is not about an overlooked place of refuge from the frets and worries of technological civilization. Quite the contrary, it deals with the strenuous efforts of a dedicated young white teacher to bring the privileges of education to the island's neglected young blacks. The film is said to be based on an account by Pat Conroy (*The Water Is Wide*) of the experiences he had teaching on such an island, not far from Beaufort. Jon Voight plays Conroy, and he isn't installed as teacher of the fifth through eighth grades in the island's small schoolhouse very long before he finds that his students can't pronounce his name (he settles for "Conrack"), and that several can't recite the alphabet or count to ten, and, worst horror of all, that none have seen a movie.

Faced with the situation, he realizes that the island's traditional methods of education have failed and that unorthodox procedures are in order. He uses a horn to keep the children from falling asleep, plays Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on a small record player (which sounds like an expensive stereo rig), shows Humphrey Bogart films, demonstrates the Yoga lotus position, takes them on field trips for flower identification, and, to illustrate Newton's law of gravity, sits on the bough of a tree and drops an apple on a student's head. All this doesn't go down well with the island's black school principal, who seems to have little to do but heckle Voight, or with Beaufort's crusty school superintendent (Hume Cronyn), who knows how to deal with teachers who revolt against tradition.

The film's basic problem is believabil-

ity, but it is surprisingly pleasant, nevertheless, not nearly as cloying as the Disney studio might have made it, and filled with earnest intentions. If the island has been prettied up, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance in the background are by no means overlooked; and we can



Jon Voight as *Conrack*—Unorthodox teaching methods help bring isolated young blacks into today's world.

feel (or are supposed to feel) heartened at the end that the teacher has made what I guess we can call a contribution. Voight's performance is energetic and often funny. The children—non-actors all—are a delight and handled well by Martin Ritt, the director responsible for *Sounder*. My only worry is that real-estate developers, seeing all that unspoiled ocean frontage, will invade the island and sell it off in fifty-foot parcels.

A FILM SUCH AS *Conrack* is about as serious as American films are these days, and it's seldom we find one anywhere. All the more credit, then, to Maximilian Schell for the courage to write, direct, and produce *The Pedestrian*, a gloomy study of a present-day German industrialist with an unsavory wartime past. The theme, of course, is guilt, and Schell doesn't hesitate to explore its human and moral ramifications, particularly in the person of Herr Giese, the aging head of a family engineering firm, whose dead son had attempted to kill both his father and himself in a car crash, after learning of his father's seeming culpability.

The industrialist's guilt is not clear-cut, however, and what the film seems to say is that the Germans have not yet lived down the shame of Nazism and won't until an entire generation is dead and gone. The onus is still there on the elder generation, and the younger ones aren't totally in the clear either, because through newspaper and magazine sensationalism they keep digging up the past for political purposes or merely for newsstand sales. The film's distinction lies in its cool clear-sightedness and in Schell's expert direction of a literal roll call of Europe's film and theater greats.

The industrialist, for instance, is played by Gustav Sellner, formerly the director of the Berlin Opera. The English director Peter Hall makes his acting debut as an overly aggressive newspaper publisher. In the cast, too, are such illustrious names as Elisabeth Bergner, Peggy Ashcroft, Francoise Rosay, and Lil Dagover, each of whom provides a polished little cameo. While hardly aimed at widespread popular success, *The Pedestrian* is a genuine contribution to film art.

Mame, however, distinctly is not. This big, blowsy Warner Brothers musical offers us Lucille Ball in a role for which she is remarkably unsuited, garbs her in gowns seemingly borrowed from a Busby Berkeley museum, and cakes her in makeup that makes it difficult for her to register any but the most effortless expressions. In close-ups she is seen in such fuzzy focus that one thinks it is the projector's fault. The score has eleven songs with music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, eight of which are as leaden as a potato pancake, and six of which are sung in a raucous non-voice by Ms. Ball, who dominates the show to the point of sheer audience exhaustion. Its major production number, set on a southern plantation, is geared to the hit song, "Mame," and is sillier than any ever seen in Warner's heyday of musicals.

But we must by no means overlook the film's one great virtue: Bea Arthur repeating her 1966 Tony Award-winning role as Vera. Every time she appears, the show suddenly kicks into momentary life. Her sense of comic timing, often with lines lacking in any real wit, is impeccable. She cuts a grand figure, withers, as they say, with a glance, and so outdoes Lucille Ball that one wonders why she wasn't chosen to play Mame in the first place. I'm almost inclined, for Ms. Arthur's performance alone, to recommend this ridiculous relic. □