A night of feminist theater

The Yellow Wallpaper and I Can Feel the Air, Boston Arts Group Theatre, Stage Two,

By Margie Beale

As part of its continuing women's theatre series, the Boston Arts Group is currently presenting two original one-act plays by and about women. Ann Titolo's The Yellow Wallpaper and Liz Adams' I Can Feel the Air, in one respect, the two pieces complement each other well, for the first treats the repression of women in Victorian England, while the second depicts French authoress Colette's successful struggle to free herself of her husband, critic Henri Gautier-Villars, in order to become an independent creative entity. However, the first play is clearly superior to the second in both conception and execution, and this makes for a most unfortunate contrast.

The Yellow Wallpaper, based on a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, traces with considerable sensitivity the psychological deterioration of a young woman who has fallen victim to a fit of melancholia, and finds herself unable to recover while trapped in the stifling oozhom of a country retreat, subject to her husband's rather oppressive ministrations. Gilman herself a represent Victorian wife, has created a finely drawn portrait of a woman in desperation which is fully worthy of the wider exposure a stage adaptation might give it. Still, the artistic validity of Titolo's adaption is questionable, for it is clear that although certain portions of the story translate admirably into drama, other segments might have remained for more effective in print.

Mary Chalon is engaging and convincing as this prototypical mad housewife, for she explores her character's implicit acceptance of societal attitudes towards women, as well as her resentment for these very social structures that smother her under the armed weight of institutional authority. She has captured his woman's sense of outrage, and manages to convey both her damsel in distress and the violence within her that is only so marginally suppressed. As she destroys the pattern of the yellow wallpaper in her sickroom-prison, she is fascinating in her futile, yet emoting, affecting attempts to escape the social pressures that bid her keep every last thought well within the bounds of propriety.

Chalon's acting lends this piece the intensity that makes it finally compelling and effective feminist theatre.

I Can Feel the Air, by comparison, a rather anticlimactic conclusion to this evening of women's drama. Author Liz Adams has attempted to present sixteen years of married life and professional development in a single act, and succeeds only in leaving herself insufficient time for the development of the emotional subtleties that would lend this work credibility. Fortunately for Adams, the story of Colette's struggle for artistic integrity is sufficiently interesting to hold an audience's attention in spite of her slipshod treatment of the material.

All too frequently during this second production, we find that significant moments are dismised with no further commentary than platitudes or other comments that fail to pass for wisdom. The emotions delineated are superficial at best, and the performers were generally hindered in their characterizations by the limitations of the script. The various symbolic motives contained into the plot are heavy-handed and lacking in the levels of suggestive meaning that would make them intriguing. There are moments of clarity and originality in the summary philosophizing which concludes the play, yet this degenerates into the feminist rhetoric that has lost its impact with continual repetition.

Mary Chalon is the Victorian housewife confined by The Yellow Wallpaper.

Aleta Moss if appropriately bright and matter-of-fact, is somewhat self-conscious and mannered as Colette, while Michael Rini is inconsistent and relatively unsupplied as her husband Willy. Janet Rodgers is, at moments, able to transcend the limitations of her lines, she gives us an insightful, if unsteady characterization of Colette's mother.

The presentation is by no means a failure, for Mary Chalon's performance in The Yellow Wallpaper makes audience worthwhile, if only for the first half of the program. Still, Charlotte Gilman's story, the highlight of the evening, is probably more readily accessible on a library shelf.