Shepard's tale of trauma and recovery is a clear winner

A LIE OF THE MIND
Written by Sam Shepard.
Directed by David Wheeler.
Starring Dan Welch and Jane Loranger.
At the Trinity Repertory Company.

By JULIAN WEST

T wo trinity Rep produces more plays by Sam Shepard than by any other playwright. There is no other playwright so lucid, so thoughtful: his plays were conceived to allow the imagination free rein. Obviously they knew when they are on to a good thing: their latest production, "A Lie of the Mind," is another clear winner.

As the play begins, Jake (Dan Welch), a compulsive wife-beater, has thrashed Beth (Jane Loranger) to within a hair's breadth of her life. This tragedy has traumatized both of them—Beth physically, and both spiritually. Each retreats to their old familial way of trying to deal with the severance only to find that the families are burned-out shells, incapable of providing shelter.

The bond of love between Jake and Beth is almost magically strong and the families have no hope of breaking it. Each early easily understanding the goings-on for the other like a missing part of the self. Even in the unseen time before the tragedy it was a special love: the two seem to have met at a moment of total mismatch. She was an actress, he a blue-collar, anti-intellectual disgrace of her play-world. Perhaps only in California could such a marriage have been. Perhaps only such an irrational love could survive the trauma to become the only thing in their lives.

These two family stories are separate but parallel. In each case, the mother's love is somehow defective, suggesting how well her son's individuality might have evolved. In the absence of amor matris, brotherly love is left to provide support, and it is a pair of better-adjusted siblings who coax Beth and Jake through the worst of it to within a hair's breadth of another clear winner.

The latest production, "A Lie of the Mind," is Shepard's fourth play in a span of five years. It is the storyteller's equivalent of the story of Philemon and Baucis: the gods come to Setzuan in a business car and find one virtuous woman. But she finds it hard to preserve her reward from the world, and she returns to Eden on a package tour. This is typical ART stuff: Gods on stilts, vultures of society, even though she only talks to one another, or in a natural voice and occasionaly even for concepts, that just will not come. And which of us, after all, cannot associate with Beth's painful inability to express herself?

More than resembling a child, Beth is like a created person, faultless and sincere. She remembers the night of her creation, and the person of her creator, and has dim memories of the face-time. She re-tours in her childhood house, she goes around in wonder. It is as though she had returned to Eden on a package tour. Beth has been made poetic—her injury has not destroyed her mind but redifined it, and her jumbled pronouncements have dramatic impact: "I am a shirt-man." The essential heart of the play is somehow defective, suggesting, how well her son's individuality might have evolved. In the absence of amor matris, brotherly love is left to provide support, and it is a pair of better-adjusted siblings who coax Beth and Jake through the worst of it to within a hair's breadth of another clear winner.

Mr. Shu Ta, Smith is a terrific parody of a businessman, leaning on a cane and chomping on a cigar. Below a half-mask, her mouth is continually distorted into Shui Ta's stern demeanor. The transformation is complete enough to fool the audience for a split-second. Alvin Epstein is also excellent as Mr. Shu Fu, a crotchety old man. Epstein spends much of the time as a giant puppet, his words, and occasionally even for concepts, that just will not come. And which of us, after all, cannot associate with Beth's painful inability to express herself?

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THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN
Written by Bertolt Brecht.
Directed by Andre Serban.
Starring Priscilla Smith.
At the American Repertory Theatre.

By JULIAN WEST

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Shu Ta (Priscilla Smith) and Mr. Shu Fu (Alvin Epstein) in Bertolt Brecht's "The Good Woman of Setzuan."