Search for Signs of Intelligent Life "a timeless period piece"

THE SEARCH FOR SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE
Starring Lily Tomlin
Written and directed by Jane Wagner
Shubert Theatre, through April 29.

By DAVID M. J. SASLAV

LETTY TOMLIN EXUDES TIMELESSNESS. In her humor, her pantomime, and her philosophy, she has become the quintessential comedienne of her generation and quite possibly of others as well. The aura she brings to her current vehicle, The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe, shines off the stage of the Shubert Theatre as though from one of those revolving glass balls in a disco. The sheer energy of her performance alone is a whirling wonder.

The difference between a can of Campbell's Tomato ("soup") and an Andy Warhol painting of the same object ("art"). Segueing in a flash, Tomlin moves on to an 1980s version of the 1960s radical — Agnus Angst, a 15-year-old performance artist at The Anti-Club in Indianapolis. Agnus merely moves in with her grandparents, as hostile a place as any other, but from behind a locked bedroom door, one person's house is pretty much the same as another's. Despite her wars (and perhaps in spite of them), Tomlin has not lost the dynamism and perspective necessary to portray a post-pubescent teenager convincingly.

Among the other characters in the first half of Search, we meet Kate, an upper-upper class New York social butterfly who spends more time waiting to get her hair done than she cares to think about. By inserting flashes of life in the boring lane, Search reminds us that affluence is not all it's cracked up to be. Kate finds an article which states that it is in fact possible to die from boredom, but alas, this too bores her. Tomlin's recursive humor, spiraling paradox, and insight thrown at us, and we eagerly await more.

The second half of this amazing production, however, adopts a radically different tone. The audience travels on a whirlwind journey through ERA rallies, Gestalt therapy, and marriage in what is primarily a chronicle of the boring lane, but it is the music of Angst's zippers, a car pulling out of a driveway, and many other noises effectively complement the tragicomic political awareness with upward mobility. This nearly full-length piece gives remarkable insight into the issues that have confronted women throughout civilization, in particular during the past thirty years. Lyn finds herself dominated by layers of both men and must take assertiveness training courses while her husband attends a sensitivity seminar. Trying to raise hyperactive twins ("Future Darth Vaders"), hold down a full-time office job, maintain marital relations, and lend counsel to manically depressed friends has her running to her therapist at top speed.

Though these vagaries serve as a highly diverting exposition of gender issues, much of the dramatic tension here relies upon the ability to identify with Lyn's femininity. To me, at least, much here went unappreciated, and as a result, this part of the show tended to drag. Nevertheless, Tomlin brings us home with more of Trudy's outstanding observations, and she finished to a standing ovation from the delighted crowd.

Equally outstanding as Tomlin's chauvinism and Wagner's writing are Neil Peter Jampol's scenery and lighting. As much a member of the cast as Tomlin herself, the spectacular visual effects throw much of the play's impact into even sharper relief. Noteworthy too are the sound effects which complement Tomlin's energetic stage movements. The sounds of Angst's zippers, a car pulling out after nearly leveling Trudy, the slosh of an imaginary waterfall, and many other noises effectively complement the action.

Taken all in all, The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe comes off as that rarest of animals: a timeless period piece. What we learn about ourselves and our culture as a result of observing Trudy as she observes us is significant, albeit elusive. As the aliens cryptically put it to Trudy, "the more you know, the less knowing the meaning of things... means."