

CALENDAR

Los Angeles Times

SECTION

F

FRIDAY

FEBRUARY 18, 1994

THEATER BEAT

'Mother' Packs Emotional Punch—in Sign Language

By RICHARD STAYTON
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Marsha Norman's emotionally devastating "night, Mother" earned the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for drama, so there can be no argument about its pedigree. In a decade of increasingly escapist entertainments, a theater that dares to confront this tragedy deserves respect. After all, a mother's futile struggles to block her daughter's suicide is not a story calculated to appeal to a mass audience.

But what about hearing-impaired audiences?

Can Norman's grim tale, which is told through eloquently homespun dialogue and as such resembles a Chekhovian parlor game of Russian roulette, be conveyed in American Sign Language? There is no physical struggle between Mama and Jessie. Their desperate ordeal is a verbal debate.

Deaf West Theatre Company's decision to produce the wordy "night, Mother" seems bewildering. Yet this seemingly incongruous scheduling provides a stunning revelation about a contemporary classic. The actors' urgency in their signing provokes even more heartbreak than would a standard presentation. Even the audience's headsets offering simultaneous voice translations add to the play's impact.

"night, Mother" is about communication, and the alienating effects of isolation when we fail to communicate. The script is littered with references to our reluctance to truly listen to others. Mama's lifelong failure to accurately hear her daughter, and her daughter's hunger to silence the voices in her head, are emphasized by the frantic hand signals between Freda Norman's Mama and Elena Blue's Jessie. In this context, a signed "Your hands aren't washed" gets translated into a profound metaphor.

For Jessie, suicide offers peace. "Dead is dead quiet. . . . This is how I have my say and I say no to everything and all of it. No! I say no."

"There is a shorthand to the talk," the playwright suggests in the stage directions, "and a sense of routine comfort in the way they relate to each other physically." Director Stephen Sachs has beautifully followed Norman's observation, allowing the performers to maneuver in real time through the lushly detailed kitchen and living room by set designer Jim Barbale. It's no accident that we see three clocks prominently ticking away the seconds.

But there are problems with an ASL production that Sachs has not overcome. The original version relentlessly raced to its conclusion in 90 minutes, while here the hand gestures add a half-hour to the drama, undercutting the momentum. Although the gunshot is "felt" by Mama through the door—and it's loud enough to make members of the audience jump off their seats—other crucial details seem incongruous, such as Mama's last signed words. It would be more effective and emotionally true to allow Mama a vocal exclamation, no matter how incoherent. After all, by the end an audience has heard Deaf West's message loud and clear. By language or by sound, we understand heartbreak.

■ "'night, Mother," Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Drive, Hollywood. Thursdays-Sundays 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday matinees, 3 p.m. Ends March 20. \$12-\$15. (213) 660-0877 (voice); (213) 660-8826 (TTY). Running time: 2 hours.

BACK STAGE WEST

\$1.85 California / \$2.25 elsewhere

• THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY •

March 3 - 9, 1994

CRITICS' PICKS

'NIGHT, MOTHER

at Deaf West

Reviewed by Rob Kendt

There are those in the deaf community who are tired of the approach popularized by the National Theatre of the Deaf. Staging mainstream dramas in American Sign Language, with voice-over headsets for hearing audiences, these critics feel, does little to address or nurture deaf culture.

There may be some justice in that claim, but the implication—that somehow this makes for second-rate, hand-me-down theatre—could not be more thoroughly

debunked than by Deaf West Theatre's current production of Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, which is more beautifully crafted and moving than most hearing productions of this bleak two-character drama. Perhaps because the play, in which a woman tries to talk her thirtysomething daughter out of a well-laid suicide plan, is about communication, or lack thereof, its aching desperation for human connection comes through on a wrenching gut level in the fiercely poetic body language of ASL.

As the mother, Freda Norman etches a painfully well-observed portrait of a woman who survives on the smallest of life's concessions, who lives the everyday domestic tragedy of the housecoat and the pill schedule. It's a witty, shattering performance. Elena Blue's Jessie is, strangely, less sympathetic, but this may be appropriate; Jessie is a damaged woman who has methodically drained her myriad disappointments of the drama of striving, which is why she can let them go so dispassionately. Blue, however, makes Jessie's objections a little cavalier, even sing-songy, for someone who is taking her leave of the world.

Director Stephen Sachs' staging is fluid, almost musical, despite ASL's challenge of unbroken eye contact. Jim Barbaley's set is expansively, breathtakingly detailed—with a working stove, no less—and Ilya Mindlin's lighting design enhances the lived-in suburban grimness of the setting. For the hearing, Laura Gardner's and Beth Maitland's voice-overs add an inner dimension to the powerful reality on the stage.

"'night, Mother," presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Los Angeles. Feb. 12-Mar. 20.