

'Corsetless' literally invokes Shakespeare's passionate canon

By Colin Dabkowski NEWS STAFF REVIEWER

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On the gloomy set of "Corsetless" at the Irish Classical Theatre, a curled-up figure lies motionless on an institutional iron bed as wistful cello music wafts over the crowd.

The lights dim. Slowly, the figure stirs.

Dressed in a flowing white gown scrawled with excerpts from the works of William Shakespeare, the groggy figure, Olivia, murmurs a few bewildered lines. Then she sits straight up, searching her memory.

"I dream'd a dream tonight. Prithee, listen well," Olivia says in excited tones, quoting "Romeo and Juliet" in the first sentence and "Julius Caesar" in the second. "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was," she continues, drawing on a famous speech from "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

And so it goes through the course of Catherine Eaton's singularly impressive and profoundly moving show, which debuted Saturday night. A little "King Lear" here, a wisely selected piece of "Titus Andronicus" there, all gloriously decoupage'd into a narrative that speaks in Shakespearean terms of beauty, madness, repression and ultimately the irrepressible nature of the human spirit.

Eaton's show is a most rare vision indeed, full of raw passion, longing, tragic humor and unfiltered humanity.

It centers around Olivia, a woman in solitary confinement in a mental hospital. She takes refuge in the language of Shakespeare, speaking only in lines lifted from his body of work. The walls of her room are papered with sheets ripped from his plays and sonnets, which she constantly references for inspiration in her conversations — sometimes with herself and sometimes with the disembodied voice of the doctor who committed her (Vincent O'Neill).

Such an approach could easily have yielded easy solutions, wholesale copy-

and-paste operations from mad Ophelia, for instance, but none of Eaton's choices is easy. Their careful selection and arrangement reveals a deep familiarity and love for the canon that seems to sustain the playwright as much as her character. That Eaton has applied her mind to that canon is a gift that will reward endless viewings, much like Shakespeare's plays themselves.

This is to say nothing of the performance itself, which gives powerful glimpses into the thriving field of beautiful desperation that lies beneath Olivia's linguistic permafrost.

The set, by University at Buffalo professor Lynne Koscielniak, is stellar, as is an original score from Elaine Kwon, performed beautifully by cellist Nancy Baun. Fine lighting design from Brian Cavanagh, costumes from Susan Drozd and sound design from Tom Makar all rise to the level this play demands. The same goes for the fine direction of Derek Campbell.

There are endless levels on which "Corsetless" can be appreciated, and it would be impossible to explore them all here. For different people, the play can speak equally well about the beauty and deception of language, the state of the mental health system, issues of artistic ownership, the effects of isolation on the psyche and sexuality, the nature of human spirit's desire for freedom and so on.

With "Corsetless," Eaton acknowledges that language is a lie — even Shakespearean language. But with her touch, what a beautiful lie it is.

Theater Review

" Corsetless"

★★★★

One- woman drama presented through Sunday in Andrews Theatre, 625 Main St. For more information, call 853- 4282.