
October 9, 1988 By WALTER GOODMAN

Review/Theater; 'Sharon Shashanovah,' A Play Within a Play

The mirrors and puppets that occupy the stage of the 47th Street Theater for "The Legend of Sharon Shashanovah" signal the theatergoer that yet another exercise in the merging of reality and illusion and all that may be in store. As the puppets are replaced by actors, however, hope arises that the playwright, A. F. Horn, intends a takeoff on such standard theatrical intentions and pretensions.

Mr. Horn is not one to make his own intentions entirely clear, but the appearance of Sharon Shashanovah, an actress in some sort of midcareer crisis reciting a metaphor-heavy monologue about the bird of paradise in her breast and the imperious eagle on her brow, can only be meant as a joke. Sharon Talbot, in the title role, puts a humorous spin on her lines that counters any suspicion of earnestness.

Sharon Shashanovah has come to the puppet theater ("Those with souls need not apply") to find a job and, along with it, herself. There she meets a batch of theatrical types, including a dapper impresario with an S. Hurok accent and a dubious past (played in fine style by Jeremiah Sullivan); his mother, Madame Natasha Ilyichna Ravenskaya, an acting teacher of the Stanislavsky school who makes speeches about the nobility of art; an exhortation-prone playwright filled, he proclaims, with "revolutionary passion," and an egomaniacal actor, whose attention is glued to his mirror.

The theatergoer relaxes and smiles as they go through their numbers; surely Mr. Horn will be scoring points as the company undertakes to perform "The Legend of Sharon Shashanovah," a play within a play that may or may not represent the real life of the real Sharon, insofar as she exists. For she admits to a feeling that the play is writing her.

As the act proceeds and Sharon falls in love with the actor even though she detects he is "a little sick in the head," the focus of the satire, if it is satire, begins to cloud. Still, there are some smart lines ("I have never met a man yet who didn't try to reveal me to myself," says Sharon to the plausible impresario, who intends to make her his "protegee"). Ms. Talbot and Mr. Sullivan bring snap and wit to the proceedings, and the director, Sharon Gans, gets considerable fun out of a hand-clapping battle between the impresario and his mother over artistic matters. At the intermission, the theatergoer may be slightly perplexed about where things are heading, yet retain hope of

amusements to come.

Act 2 is a hope dasher. Now we are into the play within a play, which suddenly turns out to be about the clash between artistic values and commercial temptations. The act concludes with a thuddingly ill-written, ill-acted argument between the playwright and the actor that is stunning in its obviousness. The actor says he is going to Hollywood because "the bucks are there." The playwright, who is also the actor's sometime lover, is agitated over the decline of the West. "There are no heroes anymore," he yells, as though he were saying something original, "only celebrities." The theatergoer waits for a deflating line, some wink from Mr. Horn to let us know that he is kidding. But, no, he seems to mean it. Ms. Gans, apparently giving up on this chestnut roasting, allows the characters to rant on mercilessly until the merciful blackout.

Act 3 finds Sharon and her actor in Hollywood, where the devils of success have caught up with them. She lies around in a slip on satin sheets, takes pulls from a whisky bottle and pops pills; he shoots up. They have bad dreams. No Hollywood cliché goes unhonored. The actors have become puppets of the impresario, now in sinister shades and decadent shirt. The climax, complete with incest and suicide, sinks into bathos. By now Ms. Talbot is delivering her inane monologues ("I must carry a dead man in my heart forever") as though she meant them, and even the resourceful Mr. Sullivan is flattened. Mr. Horn, leaving wit and wits behind, has succumbed to an extreme case of pretentious melodrama of the sort that one had hoped he might be spoofing. "Oh," says Sharon, "this is ghastly." No kidding. DEAD MAN IN HER HEART THE LEGEND OF SHARON SHASHANOVAH, by A.F. Horn; directed by Sharon Gans; scenery by Loren Sherman; costumes by Susan Hirschfeld; lighting by Mary Louise Geiger; puppets by Nicholas Cortes; film puppets by Jane Stein; production stage manager, Raymond Chandler. Presented by Good Omen Productions. At 47th Street Theater, 304 West 47th Street. Sharon Shashanovah . . . Sharon Talbot Joseph Ravensky . . . Jeremiah Sullivan Julio Castillo . . . Christofer De Oni Elene . . . Linda Froehlich Mme. Natasha . . . Irma St. Paule Billy Brenner . . . Michael Horn Otto Schechler . . . Frank Nastasi Andrea . . . Bronwen Barnett