

VOICES IN HER HEAD

Joan Comes to the Scranton Cultural Center

BY ANNE MARIE DELUCA

Thanks, but no thanks to Hollywood and TV Land for handing us two bloated, overdone Joan of Arcs in the past six months. First there was the literal, lethargic mini-series starring Leelee Sobieski. Then Luc Besson's *The Messenger*, starring a bug-eyed, wack-job Milla Jovovich. I don't know about anyone else, but a supermodel portraying a virgin saint just doesn't work for me. The Northeastern Theatre Ensemble's *Joan* gets to the passion of the martyr's story in way these glitzier productions couldn't.

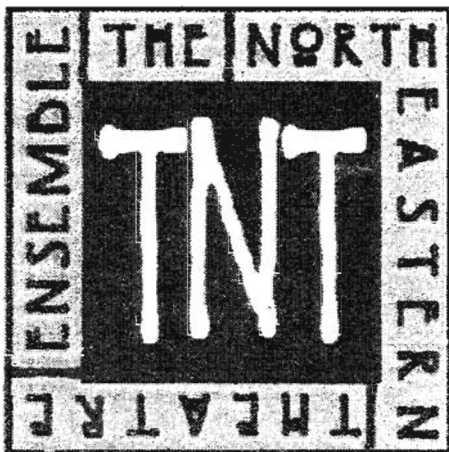
TNT's *Joan* will make you sweat. It's raw, physical and bursting with energy. By the end of the 80 minute show, the actors' clothes are wet with perspiration. The show requires them to do a whole lot more than just stand still and deliver lines. The actors are in non-stop motion... dancing, jumping, tumbling their way through the story.

This is how the play works: there are six actors, who each play multiple roles. They wear funky, malleable costumes designed by Karen Anselm that change with a few twists and turns to represent the actors' different incarnations. Think of that infomercial for the dress that could transform into a thousand different styles and cross it with a trip to Urban Outfitters and you've got the idea. Through a series of vignettes, the players tell the story of Joan. The vignettes flow into one another like a live-action montage, switching genres and settings in a flash.

JUMP-CUT STYLE REFRESHING

People who have grown up on a steady diet of MTV and Quentin Tarantino films will immediately embrace the jump-cut style of *Joan*. The moment you think things might start to get boring, the actors transform into new characters and turn the play in a new direction.

Director and writer Donna Kaz uses music that accompanies the action perfectly, segueing from atmospheric melodies to the William Tell Overture to an instrumental version of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" and more. Much of the play feels like a highly literate, artsy music video. There couldn't be a more ideal play to which to bring a theatre-reluctant teenager. It's also perfect for anyone who likes to be challenged by a non-linear narrative. It's the opposite of often cheesy, humdrum musical theatre.



TNT's Joan will make you sweat. It's raw, physical and bursting with energy. By the end of the 80 minute show, the actors' clothes are wet with perspiration.

DRY DETAILS MADE ENTERTAINING

If you didn't pay attention during European history class, a few of the vignettes capsule the potentially dry details into entertaining, edible snippets that clue the audience in to the political drama Joan dealt with. One history lesson is told by Butch Stevenson as a revved-up gospel preacher. I almost caught myself yelling "Amen!" Dina Peipoli retells the history of the Catholic church as a hilariously strict nun, as the other actors play her lazy students sorely in need of a knuckle-slap. I noticed a pair of nuns in the audience unable to hold back giggles.

The two main motifs in Joan's life were battle and the hearing of voices...and the risk of these coming off cheesy in a stage production seemed high. I was nervous that I'd hear ominous, saintly voices piped in from backstage and have to watch painfully fake-looking battle scenes. Kaz handled both elements skillfully and steered clear of obviousness at every point.

The battle scenes were more like dances than anything. As soldiers, the actors moved in slow motion under dimmed red lights in uniquely choreographed fights. They made the battles look searingly brutal yet entrancing through deliberate movements and facial expressions that hid nothing.

DARKNESS OFF-SET BY COMEDY

Kaz off-set these dark, fierce scenes with comic relief from Saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret. The voices in Joan's head apparently watched their fair share of Ricki Lake. James McMenamin's St. Michael slinked around like white-boy rapper, while Catherine Maddox turned St. Margaret into a finger-snappin' head-weavin' diva you wouldn't want to mess with. Dina Peipoli's St. Catherine was the scene stealer, though. She reminded me a lot of Cheri Oteri from *Saturday Night Live* as she threw her little five feet tall body into every word she said.

Leelee Sobieski and Milla Jovovich flitted about looking pretty (albeit in a spiritually frenzied kind of way) in their *Joan* movies. TNT's Joan, Darcie Siciliano, holds down the dramatic fort with a force neither of these actresses could muster. Siciliano brings an earthy physicality to Joan that makes her seem like a real person, not some weirdo religious zealot that no one can figure out. She subtly and effectively shows the audience how the voices she hears are at once thrilling and frustrating. Siciliano is the only character who doesn't play multiple roles, so she serves an emotion connecting point for the audience. As the world completely transforms around her, we're able to experience her confusion over the choices she must make. Siciliano's Joan is earnest, not crazed, devoted, not fanatic. Siciliano had the tough job of creating a Joan who was likable and accessible, and she succeeded. She makes you root for Joan.

CAST ROUNDS OUT PERFECTLY

Christy Meyer rounds out the cast and is at her best as the mopey Charles the Dauphin. She lends much-needed comic relief as a court stenographer who can't quite keep up during Joan's emotional heresy trial. The cast as a whole works flawlessly together and moves almost like one seamless being, each aware of what the others are doing even as they move through multiple transitions. The energy they exude transfers directly into the audience.

I dare you to walk out of *Joan* without a tear in your eye and the feeling that you can change the world for the better.