

## Theater

## Sylvia Plath Transformed On Stage

## Sylvia Plath:

## A Dramatic Portrait

With Linda Robinson, Ingrid Bar-

Aba and Dorothy Gallagher

Directed by Deborah Crockett

Conceived and adapted by

Barry Kyle

At the Court Repertory Theatre,

26 Overland St., Boston

January 16-31

Info. (617) 267-9446

By Marty Kingsbury

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the genetic effects of fall-out and the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring garden.

(from *Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait*)

Living inside the imagery of insanity, death, ecstasy, fear, Sylvia Plath was admittedly ambitious in her work, determined to have it published, affirmed, rejoiced, determined to influence other people with her poetry, to give pleasure as well as insight into the human nerve. Ambition is not a pretty attitude for artists or women, and the results often take a terrifying toll. Plath, with her act of suicide, became a symbol of women poets — a proof that it is a virtually impossible task to be a woman poet in a patriarchal world. Mental disorders, physical disorders, breakdowns, mental institutions, electro-shock therapy — why? Is it because as a woman poet she found it easier to communicate with her local midwife who knew nothing of poetry than with other poets who were all men? Or was it because she was fascinated by the terrors of death, caught in isolation, labelled by

critics as a "confessional poet" whose "next book may remove all doubts" as to her talent?

And then suicide, the act, possibly, of taking control of her life by taking control of her death. In her poem, "Lady Lazarus," she speaks to the act of her attempts at suicide, once every ten years, once a decade.

And I a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

Later in the poem, it is almost a congratulation:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

This relationship with death is not unique to Plath; with honesty rooted in the kitchen she speaks to the silence which she suffers:

Now I am silent, hate

Up to my neck,

Thick, thick.

I do not speak.

(from "Lesbos")

The play, *Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait* is really a combination of two one-act plays. One is an account of her life and suicide, conceived and adapted by Barry Kyle, drawing from letters, poems, prose and reviews of her work. The other is Plath's radio drama of three women in a maternity ward. Each of the plays rely on the technique of three voices working almost solely in monologue, giving the impression of schizophrenia, of a soul divided, of voices that cannot reach each other. All the characters in each play are named Sylvia, and her haunting presence emerges from many directions. The two plays taken together follow Plath through her birth, life, death, and finally, in the maternity ward, it returns to birth. In this structure there is the essence of Plath's nine lives, as she passes through death and returns to give birth.

The production by the Court Repertory Theatre is, unfortunately, very uneven. Some wonder-

Linda Robinson and Ingrid Bar-Aba in *Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait*

ful work is done with light and shadow, illuminating Plath's recurrent journeys into death. Linda Robinson, one of the performers, is simple, acute and vivid; she accepts that the imagery of the poems is from the environment which Plath lived with, not something she just made up. For one of

the poems, she stands in a Bell Jar of light, whispering, crying, reaching toward sanity, knowledge, into the darkness with her wrists extended. She is vulnerable, alive; she gives entrance into the honesty and cat-like curiosity of Plath's imagery. Yet Robinson's performance is contrasted by Ingrid Bar-

Aba, whose melodramatic approach is drawn out of all proportions. Whether this is the choice of performer or the director, I could not tell. There were moments when truth surfaced despite over-acting, when real laughter emerged from her throat and real tears came to her eyes. The two women play opposite and often apart from one another representing, I suppose, the ambitious vs. the imagistic Plath. But this is too simple. Plath's voices merged and blended death into life, and she did it exceptionally well. The third voice of Dorothy Gallagher is simple, understandable, hinting of the depth which Plath's poetry provokes, balancing the separated voices.

Deborah Crockett's credentials for directing this play, as the daughter of Plath's mentor Wilbur Crockett, are not enough to make this play consistently pulsate with the vitality of Plath's poetry. The complexity of Sylvia Plath is not fully realized, the journey through the poetry does not fully become the drama of survival. *Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait* is a reminder of the dramatic power of Sylvia Plath; in light and shadow, moments linger, echo, haunt, but they are only moments — a reminder of what the poetry could be if the journey were fully realized.

## Exploring Violence Against Women

## The Witch Papers

With Diana Davies, Hillary Kay, Jane Picard, Jeannette Mazima and Susie Chancey

Produced and Directed by The Big Hags Theatre Company

Collage assembled by

Diana Davies  
At the Studio Red Top, Boston  
January 18, 25

By Marty Kingsbury

*The Witch Papers* is a history of violence against women, a collage of documents, poems, songs, stories, dreams and journals of women who refuse to live by the patriarchy. The emphasis is on connections: women of lesbos, of the middle ages, of modern western culture; the mutilation of women by fire, rape, imprisonment, insanity, high heels, make-up; the courage of women to be hags, crones, amazons, sisters, lesbians, women silenced, women enraged. Although most of the material is drawn from modern sources, the work pivots on the burning of witches in Europe, 1300-1600 A.D.

Consider an estimated nine million people burned, mostly women; the patriarchal scholars found it too trivial to record in textbooks except in a few footnotes. Consider the expense of the mechanisms used — the horses

and ropes for quartering the women, the irons, chains, prison cells for enslavement, the wood for fires to burn women alive, the stout men hired for inquisition, the gay men used for fuel, the machinery invented for pressing women to death, the guillotines, the scaffolds, the rope for hanging. Consider the children forced to watch or burn with their mothers. Consider the thousands of cats drowned in sacks as rodents and vermin invade the cities carrying with them the bubonic plague. Consider the mentality that necessitates these actions, perpetuated by the institutionalized Church.

Roxbury dawn sees sorrow on the faces  
Of the friends and family held so dear.  
Women have vanished, disappeared,  
Women's lives have been taken here.

Sing of the sisters who are gone  
They are buried deep as the fear  
within the core of my heart.  
Only the tears and the bitterness remain  
And my anger cries alone once more.

(song by Diana Davies)

*The Witch Papers* emphasizes connections not only in the stories that are told, but also in the way they are presented. Movement, like moving photographs, accom-

pany the poems, stories or songs. As the catalogue of witches who were murdered is recited, the actors express through their bodies the moments when the finger is pointed pronouncing "Guilty," when the rope is pulled taut, or when the fires begin to blaze. It seemed corny at first, but the effect is lingering — the images cannot be erased from my mind — the rope is pulled, the woman's back arches, the Inquisition calls out "Guilty."

Similarly this technique is used to show women addicted to tranquilizers: their bodies growing numb, their voices losing resonance. Women silenced through history, silenced still, becoming enraged. "Sing of our sisters who are here/... our anger cries alone no more." (Diana Davies)

*The Witch Papers* gives courage as well as pain, it laments and rejoices, gives some tactical advice for going on, and claims women's memory from before the fires began. Ancient and modern, ugly and beautiful, common and profound, and highly subjective — women are beautiful, our power to heal is enormous, our depth of love is infinite. We must not be victims of atrocity; courage is ours for the claiming of our minds, our bodies, our souls.

## Black Lesbians Meet

Continued from Page 6

were so easily and eagerly received, however. Some women present at Friday night's entertainment were disturbed by the dance performance of Lady Diana, who bills herself as an "exotic dancer."

Smith explained, "Her performance was problematic. She seemed to be dancing for us as if we were a group of men... Some people were wild [about her performance]. Others were made quite nervous by it. One woman said, 'I never thought I'd see anything like this, as a lesbian.' And I guess I never really thought so, either."

Asked to comment, Luvenia Pinson, a member of the CVOBW, said, "Some very sophisticated feminists said it was 'very male identified.' I don't know what that means. If they saw her with Alvin Ailey or something, they probably wouldn't say that. Lady Diana's dancing is her creative expression and she's very well known in the lesbian community here. I go see Lady Diana every opportunity I get. My problem is that I don't have enough time to go see her."

Other evening entertainers at the conference included vocalist Linda Powell, flutist Nancy Green, and poets Joanna Reather-

stone, Becky Birtha, Loretta Bascomb and Jabu.

One act presented by Danitra Vance, a comedian from Chicago. "A brilliant artist!" is how one woman described Vance. "What she's doing is significant because most of the participants in the school of black comedy are male — like Flip Wilson," the woman told GCN. "But her humor is different because she's a woman — and a lesbian and a feminist. She's a black lesbian feminist comedian in consciousness and delivery and content — which makes her different from Robin Tyler, also."

Continued on Page 11

Gary Buseck and  
Stephen Ansolabehereannounce the opening of  
new law offices

BUSECK&amp;ANSOLABEHERE

2 Park Square, Suite 311

Boston, MA 02116

(617) 426-9244

FOR SALE

Ogunquit Maine Restaurant

\$180,000

Warm cozy restaurant in coastal village—  
1 minute walk to Ogunquit Playhouse—  
5 minute walk to Perkins Cove and beaches—  
Motels abutting—90 seats—  
Year round business—Good gross—  
\$180,000 firm/\$60,000 down and walk in  
on this pretty turnkey operation—  
owner financing available—

FOR INFORMATION CALL MORNINGS  
BETWEEN 8 & 10 AM (207) 646-5900  
ASK FOR JJ.

Clark, Jil. "Black Lesbians Gather in First Eastern Conference." *Gay Community News*, vol. 8, no. 27, 31 Jan. 1981, pp. [1]+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/LIPQZU586446145/AHSI?u=nypl&sid=bookmark-AHSI](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/LIPQZU586446145/AHSI?u=nypl&sid=bookmark-AHSI). Accessed 2 Apr. 2023.