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'Heidi' chronicles evolving roles for women

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Director Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson has personal experience with the "The Heidi Chronicles," the play that opens UIS Theatre's new season at 7:30 p.m. Friday in the Studio Theatre on the University of Illinois Springfield campus.

Thibodeaux-Thompson said she was in the play in 1994, though for the sake of her actors she doesn't want to say which characters she played. Then just 5 years old, the play's ideas were still fresh, perhaps even raw.

"There were many feminist theater critics at the time who felt that it didn't do — I don't know how to put this, and I want to be careful so it doesn't give the ending away — they felt it wasn't accurately depicting the feminist struggle or the feminist achievement," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

"The Heidi Chronicles" (see below for ticket information) follows the title character from her school days in the 1960s, when feminism was on the rise, through a high-powered career as an art historian in the 1980s, when the character is lost personally and has a more nuanced view of the movement.

"I don't think Wasserstein set out to write a play that would be the poster-child for feminism, and I don't think we need to hold this play up as that," Thibodeaux-Thompson said. "However, I think it is a strong embodiment of second-wave feminism."

First-wave feminism, in the early part of the 1900s, focused on legal discrimination against women: property and voting rights. The second wave focused on more subtle societal and legal issues such as sexuality, reproductive rights, workplace discrimination and the like.

The idea is embodied nicely by a T-shirt Thibodeaux-Thompson owns, from the Guerrilla Girls, a group of women who anonymously stage public events about feminism while wearing gorilla masks.

The shirt has a picture of a named woman wearing such a mask, and asks, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" A related billboard explained: "Less than 5 percent of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85 percent of the nudes are female."

Coincidentally, that's what Heidi does for work: she's an art historian who focuses on reclaiming female artists lost to history.

"I think it is indicative of aspects of the feminist movement. Where are the women? And finding our place, women finding their place in the world," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

Ashley Warren, 24, plays Heidi. She graduated from UIS with a degree in psychology and works as a behavioral therapist for children with autism.

"I went into psychology because I have a fascination with people, where people fit in life," Warren said.

"It's interesting to look at this play, because yes, it is about Heidi," Warren said. But Heidi is "a highly informed spectator. She's looking at these other people who are influencing her as well."

This year's UIS Theatre season features only female playwrights: Wasserstein and, for the spring production, Rebecca Gilman's "Spinning Into Butter." Thibodeaux-Thompson said she also will be teaching a course on female playwrights next semester.

She said it's nice to not be considered a "specialty act."

"The fact that we get to have an entire class for an entire semester, focused on women playwrights, I love that," she said.

Wasserstein, who died in 2006 at age 55, not only made advances for female playwrights. In a relatively small number of plays, she also made significant advances for female characters.

"The main characters are women, and the supporting characters are women. And they're strong women, and they're intelligent, and they're educated," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

"We do have a history of plays — not just in this country but around the world — with really fascinating, interesting women characters: Shakespeare, "A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen, sure. But on a regular basis, to see a Broadway play where not only one, but two, three, four primary characters are women, was huge," she said.

Brian Mackey can be reached at 747-9587.

'The Heidi Chronicles'

- o Presented by UIS Theatre
- o When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Oct. 28-30; 2 p.m. Sunday
- o Where: Studio Theatre, on the lower level of the Public Affairs Center, University of Illinois Springfield
- o Tickets: \$14, available at the Sangamon Auditorium ticket office, 206-6160 or www.sangamonauditorium.org

'Heidi' on Broadway

"The Heidi Chronicles" was a milestone for Wendy Wasserstein. It opened March 9, 1989, on Broadway and ran for 622 performances before closing in September 1990.

It won the first Tony Award for best play given to a lone female writer and earned Wasserstein the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

The play featured a number of actors who would go on to find wider success in Hollywood and on TV. Joan Allen played the title character, while several of the supporting roles were played by Cynthia Nixon (Miranda on "Sex and the City"). Coincidentally, those roles had been played off-Broadway by Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie on "Sex and the City").

Wasserstein wrote 11 plays during her career. She died in 2006 following a diagnosis of lymphoma. She was 55.

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