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'Heidi Chronicles' also a chronicle of the Baby Boom generation

By **ELAINE SPENCER**

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Wendy Wasserstein's Tony Award-winning play "The Heidi Chronicles" is often described as a feminist drama about one woman's quest to "have it all".

But the play, which opened Friday at the UIS Studio Theatre, can also be seen as a chronicle of the Baby Boom generation.

Complete with a soundtrack of classic '60s, '70s and '80s hits and references to seminal events of the era, "The Heidi Chronicles" captures the idealism, angst, and self-absorption of Boomers who, even now, are still thinking about what they want to be when they "grow up" and redefining what "grown up" means.

Directed by Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson, "The Heidi Chronicles" opens in 1989 (the year it was written) with art history professor Heidi Holland (Ashley Warren) lecturing her students about the history -- or more precisely, the lack of documented history -- of women in art prior to the 20th century.

The action then flashes back to 1965, with Heidi and her best friend Susan Johnston (Cassie Poe) attending a high school dance. Although painfully shy Heidi disregards Susan's advice on how to attract the attention of the boys, one boy, Peter Patrone (Jason Youngberg) is drawn to her nonetheless and strikes up a friendly conversation with her.

Three years later, traipsing through the snows of New Hampshire promoting Sen. Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential campaign, Heidi meets aspiring journalist Scoop Rosenbaum (Ben Beams). Unlike Peter, he is worldly-wise and cynical to the point of being obnoxious at times, but he too finds her attractive, and they begin an on-again, off-again relationship that runs throughout the play.

Along the way, Heidi takes part in a women's consciousness-raising group, launches her career as an art professor, witnesses Peter's coming out as gay and Scoop's marriage to a demure Southern Jewish woman (Jennica Danner), and watches her friends move through changes in careers and relationships. Gradually, Heidi begins to feel that life is passing her by and resolves to do something about it.

Warren, a UIS alum, plays Heidi as a sincere idealist who tries, not always successfully, to establish her own identity and at the same time please the people around her. In a manner reminiscent of Tom Hanks' Forrest Gump, she becomes swept up in the tides of social change without at first realizing their significance. Youngberg's Peter remains her most steadfast friend throughout, while also launching a career as a pediatrician and eventually confronting the AIDS epidemic.

Beams, as Scoop, has exactly the kind of looks, voice and presence one would associate with a media or political figure. Although his character is easy to dislike due to his chronic womanizing and arrogant attitude, he also shows flashes of vulnerability and serious thought about what kind of legacy he will leave to his children.

Poe, as Susan, provides a dash of comedy as she transitions from giddy teenager to feminist activist to celebrity-obsessed yuppie. Among the supporting cast, Danner stands out in three very different roles: as Lisa, Scoop's wife and devoted mother of his children; as Fran, a 1970s feminist radical in combat boots and beret, whose motto is "either you shave your legs or you don't"; and as April, the bubbly host of a 1980s morning talk show. The remaining members of the supporting cast -- Diane Sahagun, Karina Diaz, Matt Dobill and Tommy Caldwell -- all appear in multiple roles as well.

The music used in the play includes Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart", Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman", Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," and many other songs Boomers will instantly recognize. For younger attendees, a helpful glossary explaining some of the people and events referred to in the play (Three Mile Island, the Equal Rights Amendment, etc.) is included in the program.

Elaine Spencer can be reached through the Metro Desk at 788-1517.

Want to go?

"The Heidi Chronicles" runs 2 hours and 45 minutes with a 10-minute intermission. It includes profanity and adult themes not suitable for children. Other performances will be at 7:30 p.m. tonight, Oct. 28, 29 and 30 at 2 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Studio Theatre, on the lower level of the Public Affairs Center, University of Illinois Springfield

Tickets: \$14, available at the Sangamon Auditorium ticket office, 206-6160 or www.sangamonauditorium.org

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