

is mistress, Carolyn Hoerdmann works hard to fuse Caesonia's sensuality and cruelty into a treacherous mix. Giggling idiotically as the opportunistic Helicon, Matt Yde exudes venality from every pore (but overdoes the leering). And as the poet-victim Scipio, Charley Knapp suggests rectitude under fire but not much else.

Two drawbacks are the house's poor acoustics, which require more precise articulation than these actors provide, and this staging's strange lack of guards. Caligula may feel alone, but it's not supposed to be literal.

MARYAM'S PREGNANCY

Hidden Theatre
at Splinter Group Studio

By Josefa Smith

Set in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, *Maryam's Pregnancy* revolves around an unwed pregnant girl who is forced into hiding in order to stay alive because her moral crime is punishable by stoning. Staying alive means enduring the last seven months of her pregnancy in the dark, pest-ridden basement of her blind aunt. With only monthly visits from her mother, Maryam lives on stale bread and wormy water, and is forced to bury her excrement in the dirt. This engrossing story, written by Iranian playwright Ezzat Goushegir and performed by the Hidden Theatre, is told not with seething self-righteousness but with pathos and a surprisingly well-placed playfulness.

The play begins with Maryam howling like a dog and sniffing a garbage can. She's so hungry, she says, she dreams of swimming in a broth of carrots and peas—her own "dog soup." Then another actress comes out of the audience claiming to be the "real" Maryam, and accuses the first

actress of portraying her falsely. It's as if the writer were being called to account for her portrayal of her subject—by her subject. Through this device, Goushegir freely admits her own inability, and that of any playwright, to create or re-create a story without resorting to some affectation.

As the two Maryams—Actress and the real Maryam—compete to tell the same story, *Maryam's Pregnancy* becomes an interesting study of truth, of how it changes through art, from person to person, and with the passage of time. Actress represents Maryam before and during pregnancy, and the real Maryam represents the same woman after the life-altering event. Actress recalls her lover Jasem with "skin like black polished leather"; the real Maryam remembers him simply as the "fucking jerk" who got her pregnant. Throughout the play, these two distinct perspectives balance romance with cynicism, acceptance with bitterness, and beauty with ugliness.

The play can also be seen as a cruel spin on the story of Rapunzel, which Maryam's mother narrates as Maryam's own story is being reenacted. Goushegir's main aim may be to criticize the way fairy tales teach us to perceive women (as relying on men); yet at the same time the author is copying the fairy tale and in doing so admitting its appeal. Each story stirs sympathy with a protagonist who is misjudged and cruelly punished—Rapunzel captured in a tower and Maryam locked in a dungeon. The main difference is that while Rapunzel is saved by a prince, Maryam is imprisoned because of her "prince."

The crucial job of establishing rapport between the two Maryams is well handled by Inger Hatlen (Actress) and Jen Moses (the real Maryam) and

director Hannah Gale (who also plays Maryam's mother). The two characters begin antagonistically—and the actresses a little awkwardly, with one barging in on the other's performance—but gradually the adversaries come to support each other well, providing the contrasting personalities that add up to one believable character. Though it might sound ridiculous to have two women write in unison while each gives birth, Hatlen and Moses seem natural in a dual birth scene in which their characters are joined physically as they are emotionally.

Jim Schumacher's set is simple, consisting of a garbage can, a wall, and a platform, but the action is nicely supported by it and by the sound design (Saeid Lahouti) and choreography (Melanie Pot). When Actress Maryam is seduced by the insincere Jasem (Paul Bunton), their movements and the romantic music are sensual yet broad enough to suggest the humor in Maryam's naivete.

Maryam's Pregnancy is one of those small productions that can bring a big issue (such as women's sexual rights) down to a manageable size through a simple story, interesting characterization, and the right mix of seriousness and irreverence.

THE KILLING

Center Theater Studio

TRANSFORMING SEXTON

Center Theater

by Mary Shen Barnidge

Big-city lawyer Marv Cohen arrives with lofty ideals when he's called in to advise Suzette Wilson, the attorney for a midwestern Indian reservation, on initiating an on-site gambling casino. Soon afterward he meets the la-

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