

review: joan of arc: vision through fire

The flames are raging higher and higher and the sax is wailing louder and louder as Joan is consumed by the fire. She takes a crucifix from someone in the crowd and presses it inside her shirt. Then her arms are twisted behind her and tied tightly. We hear her groan from the pain of her burning flesh. The music grows louder and louder until Joan screams out at the top of her lungs, "Jesus!" We can almost feel the heat of the fire. We can almost smell the smoke.

But there is no fire. There is no smoke. Only a thin girl with short hair standing on a folding chair on a blank stage. A man with a saxophone is circling her as he plays the death melody. There is nothing else to see. And yet, we feel it all.

Such is the quality of Maria Pessino's performance in Glyde Hart's "Joan of Arc: Vision Through Fire." Such is the quality of Hal McKusick's command of the music. And this is only the first scene.

Joan/Maria steps down from her chair and tells her already rapt audience: "Joan swore to tell the truth. I'll swear that I'll be acting. But I won't be lying. So when you see me playing Joan, or the Judge, the King, or the Army; it's not only me playing, it really is me; being me, being an actress, being Joan."

After that, Maria Pessino takes us through every step of Joan's life, literally from her first baby step which Maria expertly pantomimes, to her last walk toward the fire which consumes her. We see Joan the farm girl rolling in the dirt. Joan the general leading her troops to battle. And Joan the accused answering her inquisitors. And yet all we really see is Maria walking up and down a stage and Hal McKusick sitting in one corner playing his sax.

What makes this play work for the audience is the combination of diverse individual talents that are being brought to the production.

Glyde Hart, who recently brought us "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea" at Stephen Talkhouse in Amagansett, directs this performance. She is a woman of many talents: actress, writer, director and producer and currently director of The Art Barge.

Hal McKusick, who played with many of the big band giants including Buddy Rich, Les Brown and Woody Herman, not only brings superb musical talent to the production, but also a fascinating stage presence. Mr. McKusick has worked on stage with no less than Edward Albee

"Joan of Arc: Vision Through Fire" will be performed at LTV Studios, 211 Springs Fireplace Road, East Hampton on Wednesday through Sunday nights, February 19 through March 1, at 8 p.m. There will also be Sunday matinees February 23 and March 1 at 3 p.m.

in his Broadway production of "The Death of Bessie Smith."

The lighting design which helps create the very effective illusion of fire is done by Richard Neu. Mr. Neu has done lighting designs all over the Island and in the City including The Wonder Horse Theatre in Manhattan and the Gateway Playhouse in Bellport.

And last, but by no means least, Maria Pessino, currently director of Oddfellows Playhouse, has done everything from fashion modeling to film acting. She has worked with The Theatre for the Open Eye and The Orpheum in New York. She has modeled in Paris and studied dance with Merce Cunningham. All of this shows in this performance.

Movement plays a very important part in conveying the events of Joan's life in the brief space

of little over one hour with virtually no props. Maria's dance background serves her well as she crawls, wiggles and marches across the stage.

When she is imprisoned in a high tower, Joan's only means of escape is to jump. Maria enacts her fall from the tower very convincingly by merely stepping off a chair in slow motion. Hitting the ground and writhing in pain, she makes us believe that she has actually fallen.

That performance is laudable, but when she is shot by an arrow during a battle and pulls her hand away to look at the blood, one expects to see the red liquid flowing between her fingers. But no cheap tricks for this performance. We must only imagine the blood. And we do.

Not only does Ms. Pessino play Joan convincingly, she also is able to create the illusion of other characters on the stage. She switches back and forth from Joan to her accusers by merely changing position on the stage. She plays the Dauphin, the captain, and an entire army. Wielding a sword that seems way too heavy for her, Joan/Maria rides valiantly across the stage on her charger. But there is no sword. There is no charger. Only a folding chair and one actress, but never has a folding chair been ridden so well.

I must say, at this point, that as a critic I feel obliged to find some fault with this performance, to find some flaw to warn you of. I suppose there are moments when the action drags a bit, when maybe the heavy breathing to convey pain goes on a bit too long. But all of that is really nitpicking.

At the end of the performance, I felt a great deal of time had passed, I felt as though I had had a complete theatrical experience and I was surprised to see how short the performance actually was. I felt truly transported by what transpired in front of me and I only saw a rehearsal.

See "Joan of Arc: Vision Through Fire."

— Ellen Keiser