



**I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAND:** Mrs. Moorehead (Frances Hyland) consoles the polka-dotted Mrs. Mary Haines in *The Women*.

By KEN KEOBKE

The red curtain of the Royal Alex slowly rises to reveal a profusion of redheads scurrying through a massive wardrobe of red dresses, red

shoes and red hat boxes as they arrange red roses, their own red dresses and red furniture on a red floor.

The play is Clare Boothe Luce's scathing attack on society bitches

## The Women shine at Royal Alex

and is called, simply, *The Women*. After the 1936 premier of the play, Luce said that the work was inspired by women who "...smacked across the face with a meat axe."

*The Women* is a wonderful meat axe. Premiering in the middle of the great depression, it parodied the wealthy New York audiences who sat comfortably watching it while thousands huddled in tar paper shacks in nearby Central Park.

The plot revolves around six society girlfriends and their competitors, affairs, scandals and divorces. In the middle is Mrs. Mary Haines, whose trusting nature is deceived and then destroyed.

The play is a comedy until the intermission lights reveal many teary faced audience members who obviously see themselves too clearly on stage. The production is contemporary in that its message is as unchanging as human relations.

*The Women* is performed by 15 women in 34 roles including one very charming 14 year old (Jackie

Mahon) who plays Little Mary Haines. The 15 scene changes, including an outrageous Reno landscape of flowing fluorescent cacti introduced by booming Aaron Copeland music, are made by the actresses.

The effect of so many women in the play conveys what was, and (to a large measure) sadly still is a woman's world. The world is inhabited by sad Cinderellas chasing wealth and faithful mothers being cheated out of alimony in male dominated courts. These are some of the inequalities that force love to be a minor consideration in the search for and selection of a husband.

Some of the reasons for the spectacular use of red can be discerned from the opening and closing lines of the play. Mary's reptilian girlfriend, Sylvia Fowler, shows her well manicured claws and explains the colour—Jungle Red.

At the play's end, Mary has also picked up the colour, but, the omnipresence of red throughout the play

makes the audience look for more subtle reasons. At one point a hard-working underling, disgusted at the waste of money, declares that all will change "when the revolution happens." Clearly, Luce was reflecting on the inevitability of massive social change in a class situation where there is such disparity of wealth.

Instead of revolution, World War II came during which *The Women* was even performed by an all male cast of American GIs. The war ended the depression and provided private and government opportunities for lessening poverty.

Conspicuous consumption (illustrating one's wealth through the ability to waste it) became *déclassé*. Legislation giving women equal wages for equal work slowly began to be introduced. *The Women* has its greatest message in the understanding of how familiar the women's complaints sound, and in how little their conditions have changed in the 50 years since the play's premier.

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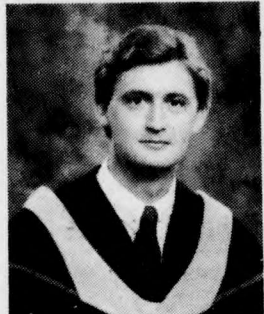
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