

The Washington Times: Up from liberalism, by Jayne Blanchard



Not that you would ever wish infirmity and hard times on anyone, but the vagaries of aging seem to agree with playwright Wendy Wasserstein. Her two new works in progress, "Welcome to My Rash" and "Third," are funny and deeply, unexpectedly poignant. The playwright still has a way with Big Apple glibness and gingery one-liners, but there is a sense of loss and a largeness of heart in these new works that show breathtaking maturity. The one-acts are getting world premieres at the intimate Theatre J under the nurturing direction of Michael Barakiva. Mr. Barakiva is a young New York director who specializes in new works, and his ability to shape and guide raw material is deftly on

display with "Welcome to My Rash" and "Third." The smart, Ivy League humor that we have come to know and love in Miss Wasserstein's plays is very much in evidence, but Mr. Barakiva also draws out new, darker elements with delicacy and care.

Gone are the relatively carefree heroines of "The Heidi Chronicles" and "An American Daughter," who wish to be acknowledged, understood and validated. The female characters in "Welcome to My Rash" and "Third" have a more immediate concern: survival. Beyond that, they want to escape that shadowland of invisibility and obsolescence that our culture reserves for middle-aged women. In "Welcome to My Rash," highly respected writer Flora Berman (Kathryn Grody) isn't trying to recapture her youth — although she wouldn't mind regaining some vision, some balance or a day without tingling in her feet and hands. Her mysterious ailments lead her to Dr. Varajan (the jovial and sneakily comic Bill Grimmette), who recommends experimental treatments that are not unlike chemotherapy. During the treatments, Flora goes into a Demerol-induced delirium, reimagining the Cupid and Psyche myth with an African-American rabbi (Mr. Grimmette), a purveyor of smoked fish (Janine Barris) and a pretty boy (Edward Boroevich) who rightfully belongs in the Abercrombie & Fitch ads.

The diverting flights of druggy fantasy are staged with whacked-out grace, but the most affecting part of "Welcome to My Rash" (the title refers to an existential breakout Flora experienced while in college) is the notion of being allergic to your own flesh and blood. Flora experiences the ultimate expression of feminine self-loathing—she is allergic to her own hormones, to menopause. Flora's body is the enemy, and she must befriend the enemy in

order to move forward. Once she lets go of bitterness and regrets, Flora begins to grow new skin and cells, in a sense, and her creative spark re-emerges from the depths of her former self. "Third" deals with another form of regeneration, that of the mind. Laurie Jameson (Miss Grody) is a literature professor at an excruciatingly politically correct liberal arts college. She has all the right credentials — Harvard, Oxford. Her lecture theses — such as, for example, that "King Lear's" Regan and Goneril had the right idea, while Cordelia was a wimp and a simp — strike just the right note of feminist provocation.

She meets her match in the unlikeliest of places, her classroom. One of her students, Woodson Bull III (Mr. Boroevich), is everything she has fought against since the 1960s. He is a preppy Republican who is on the wrestling team and wants to be a sports agent. Bull is also whip-smart, and when he turns in a brilliant paper on "King Lear," Laurie erroneously accuses him of plagiarism.

While "Rash's" Flora is betrayed by her body, the intellectually confident Laurie is betrayed by her brain. Her knee-jerk liberalism has blinded her. Bull's challenge forces Laurie to recognize that her political stance — which hasn't changed since the Age of Aquarius — has limited her perspectives instead of expanding them. This realization forces Laurie to examine other stunted parts of her intellect. Miss Grody captures both the shaky uncertainty of Flora Berman and the vigorous intellect and unsparing self-scrutiny of Laurie Jameson with luminous clarity and forthrightness. You have to give Miss Wasserstein and Theatre J credit for giving us plays of such promise and wisdom.