

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

"THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB"

Noted Bay Area artist and lighting designer, **Stephanie Johnson**, has mounted an entertaining and daring, conceptual production of "THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB" written by Belgian playwright **Michel de Ghelderode** in 1928. The play takes place on the dark and chaotic night of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. It focuses on the relationships of women on their way to the tomb of Christ. Familiar figures from the New Testament appearing include, **Mary Magdalene (DeeDee Rodriquez)**, Lazarus' sisters **Mary and Martha (Vivienne Louise and Guadalupe' Copendah)**, **Mary the Mother of Jesus (LeOna Harris)** assisted by **John the Apostle (Jafer Keller)**, the woman saved from stoning for adultery (**Elena Featherston**), the woman who wiped Christ's forehead (**Jude Bell**) and other lesser known or invented characters such as the **Midwife (Tina Marie Murray)**, the **Layer Out of the Dead (Lynn Dolce)**, **Pontius Pilate's and Judas' wives (Melanie Moore and Lisa Zebro)**. Each woman carries a secret on this collective journey.

Artist-Director, **Stephanie Johnson** created an organic, sculptural environment with furniture and architectural elements of tree branches, limbs and moss. A prologue written by Stephanie opens the show. It consisted of an "improvisational" conversation between the playwright and director. The prologue provided a background on the works and life of the playwright and the director's point of view. It was



STEPHANIE ANNE JOHNSON

both informative and entertaining. **Stephanie and Rene' Migliaccio** (playing the playwright) worked well together. Their conversation had such honesty to it, that it seemed to be truly improvisational, truly "real". Their timing was sharp. My interest heightened when during a mystic discussion on war and small objects, having a "life and story". Stephanie recalls as a child visiting the Salvation Army and seeing numerous damaged dolls with arms or legs torn off etc. and wondering about the lives of the person that use to own that doll.

Stephanie staged the show in the round with a talented cast of 12 women and 2 men in a cozy 40 seat performing space at the Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant Avenue, it is a historic landmark designed by **Julia Morgan**. I was much impressed with the building.

Tina Marie Murray was confident as the Midwife, with

crisp words she gave the audience a glimpse of her command of the stage and acting ease. **Lisa Zebro** as Judas' wife was also impressive capturing the audience as she stormed into her scene looking for her husband. Other standouts includes the regal grace of **Melanie Moore** and **Elena Featherston** and veteran Bay Area actress **LeOna Harris** emoting tears as she agonizes over the death of her "condemed son".

Stephanie Johnson lives in Berkeley and has been a lighting designer for over twenty years, working nationally and internationally with groups such as **Oakland's Dimension Dance Theatre**, **San Francisco's Cultural Odyssey**, the **Oregon Shakespeare Festival** and **Lunes de Mai theatre** in Paris. She designed several shows I directed including **BROTHER DAP**, and **THAT SERIOUS HE-MAN BALL** at the **Oakland Ensemble Theatre**. She has taught theatre workshops at the **Theatre School in Amsterdam, Holland**, and in the women's prisons in **Pleasanton, California** and **Framingham, Massachusetts**.

I urge you to see the play and witness the creative energy of **Stephanie** and support the many talented actors of color in the show. "THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB" is scheduled to perform again at the **Blue Lodge Room** in the gothic **Scottish Rites Temple**, 1547 Lakeside Drive in **Oakland** on **Saturday September 26th** at 8pm and **Sunday 27th** at 3pm. *written by JHD*

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