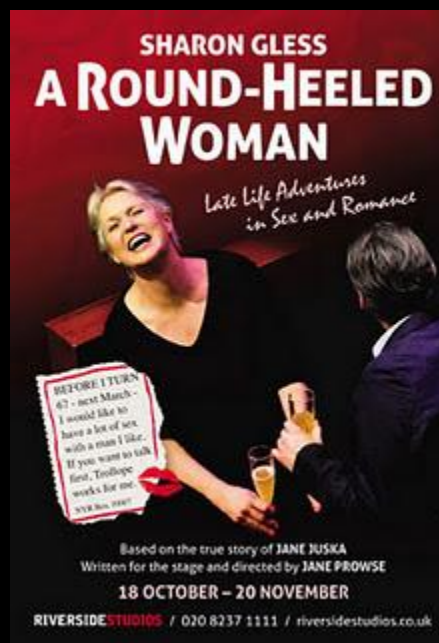




Thursday, 20 October 2011

Review: A Round-Heeled Woman - Riverside Studios, London

A Round-Heeled Woman



First off, I loved this. I didn't think I would, it being essentially about the sex life of a 66 year old woman, but the warmth and humour with which this story is told took a firm hold of me within about a minute of the play opening, and didn't let go until well after it had finished.

I have always been a fan of a shock or two in theatre, and I love scenes that make you squirm but, without you realising, put you more at ease. The opening of A Round-Heeled Woman does just that, with Sharon Gless (best known as Christine Cagney in Cagney and Lacey) laying on her bed talking on the phone while her hand rides up her thigh. I have never seen phone sex on stage, nor have I ever watched a woman in her 60s masturbate (on stage or off) before tonight.

Any awkwardness of that moment was brought to an immediate halt with the impeccably timed line: "Of course I'm alone! Do you think I'd do this in front of an audience?"

Adapted from Jane Juska's book of the same name, *A Round-Heeled Woman* is the true story of a 66 year old retired English teacher who, after not having a lover in over 30 years, places a personal ad in the *New York Review of Books*. The ad, which simply reads "Before I turn 67 – next March – I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me," received 63 replies, from men aged 32 to 84 and led to something of a sexual odyssey for Juska. The play depicts a few of these encounters with stark but refreshing honesty.

Sharon Gless' performance is, without doubt, exceptional. She is on stage throughout the entire play, even changing costume in full view which adds to the openness and honesty so evident throughout. To perform for that length of time, without even a short break (for there is no interval), is remarkable and doubly so with the level of energy given to the role by Gless. The cast also includes Jane Bertish, Beth Cordingly, Barry McCarthy, Neil McCaul and Michael Thomson, all of whom give excellent performances with several roles each.




There are some very interesting parallels drawn between Juska's story, and Anthony Trollope's *Miss Mackenzie*. Both women are considered 'on the shelf' by their respected societies (Juska at 68 in 1999, Mackenzie at 36 in 1865). Both are searching for something their society sees as unobtainable at their age (Mackenzie is seen as too old for a love match, while modern society tends to shy away from acknowledging the sexuality of our older generation). Both make unusual choices in their search (Mackenzie moves alone to an unknown town, Juska places her very frank advertisement). And both ultimately find what they are looking for – Miss Mackenzie finds a lifetime of comfort and tenderness, while Juska has a lot of sex with several men she likes ("I had no idea it would be so plural!").

Juska's bravery and optimism is also reflected in the story of how this play came into being. It was Gless' husband who first saw the potential. "If you had any balls, you'd go after this," he told her. It took Gless a year to get the rights to the book, initially hoping to turn it into a television series. After several attempts, it seemed no studio was going to pick the story up, so Gless gave the book to Jane Prowse for a second opinion. Prowse loved it and skilfully adapted and directed it for the stage. It has been a long crusade for Gless, but one I am pleased she embarked upon as this is an excellent production of an inspirational and truly remarkable story.

A Round-Heeled Woman plays at Riverside Studios until 20 November. Tickets £21/£25 from <http://www.riversidestudios.co.uk/>

Review by Robin Foreman-Quercus

Posted by Steve Stubbs at 17:35 

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