



A Round-Heeled Woman, Riverside Studios, London

[Matilda Battersby](#) 

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"Of course I'm alone. What? You think I'd do this in front of an audience?" Jane Juska is in the early stages of phone sex when the curtain comes up. Looking out into the stalls she reacts in mortification, mumbles "I'll call you back...!" and so begins the confessional journey of a 66-year-old woman, who after 30 years of celibacy, embarks on a series of sexual misadventures.

The story of *A Round-Heeled Woman* is that of the real life Jane Juska, as told in her bestselling American memoir of the same name, subtitled *My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance*. Adapted for the stage by Jane Prowse, the play is in London for its European debut after a successful run in Miami. The beautiful and sexy Sharon Gless, most famous for playing Detective Christine Cagney in the 1980s cop drama *Cagney & Lacey*, assuredly reprises her role as the fiendishly funny Sextenarian.

Declaring herself starved of physical touching, the retired English literature teacher takes action by placing a personal ad in the *New York Review of Books*, saying: "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." As it turns out most of the men would rather not talk. But the Trollope of her preferred conversation is Anthony, and not, as one of her suitors mistakes, a misspelled description of herself.

Jane repeatedly compares herself to Trollope's heroine, Miss Mackenzie, who at 37 finds herself on the shelf, in possession of a small fortune, and on the hunt for a husband. The parallels between the two women probably work well on the page. But on stage the repeated appearance of Miss Mackenzie in Victorian dress, spouting wisdom, can be amusing, but mostly seems rather unnecessary.

The supporting cast of five actors, two women and three men, whizz on and off stage, becoming a gaggle of female friends, Jane's parents, her son Andy and, of course, the many shapes, attitudes and accents of the various men she tries on for size. It is great fun, high energy and there are a few brilliant lines, such as "He's an archaeologist? Perfect! The older you get the more interested he'll be." But the play is not of itself a brilliant one, handicapped by moments of badly established schmaltz, such as the scene in which Jane is reconciled with her son. The success of the production is almost entirely carried by a brilliant central performance from Sharon Gless.

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