

Christine Dolen

Review | 'A Round-Heeled Woman' an ode to reclaimed joy

IF YOU GO

What: *A Round-Heeled Woman* by Jane Prowse.

Where: GableStage in the Biltmore Hotel, 1200 Anastasia Ave., Coral Gables.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday (no late show this Sunday), through Jan. 30.

Cost: \$47.50 Saturday, \$42.50 Friday and Sunday matinee, \$37.50 Thursday and Sunday evening.

Info: 305-445-1119, gablestage.org.

BY CHRISTINE DOLEN

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A Round-Heeled Woman, the memoir-inspired play starring a radiant Sharon Gless, is a sexy, funny, touching celebration of one mature woman's journey from unintended celibacy to a recharged sex life.

Yet on a deeper level, director-playwright Jane Prowse's script is about so much more: facing fears, taking chances, admitting mistakes, seeking forgiveness. Above all, the play is an ode to reclaimed joy.

At GableStage through the end of January, *A Round-Heeled Woman* is based on the memoir of retired teacher Jane Juska, whose frank personals ad in the *New York Review of Books* led to a sexual odyssey, personal growth and familial reconnection.

Juska's journey was, obviously, more complex than a 90-minute play can convey. But both Prowse's storytelling and Gless' embodiment of Juska are full of emotional truths, some full of exhilarating optimism, others just plain painful.

Prowse, who also directed the GableStage production, immediately establishes a tone and cleverly puts anyone who might be nervous about the play's subject (an older woman asks for sex -- and gets it!) at ease.

As the lights come up, we see Gless alone on a bed, obviously engaged in the start of some flirty phone sex. She tells the guy on the line that she has never done this before, that *of course* she's alone because she'd never get all erotic in front of an audience. Then she notices us, hangs up, stands up and starts talking. We laugh, and any tension dissipates. We like her. There's no divide between actor and audience.

Gless, the television veteran so very familiar from *Cagney & Lacey*, *Queer as Folk* and *Burn Notice*, proves as fearless as the woman she portrays. Whether changing clothes in full-on stage light,

getting busy with the actors who play Jane's varied lovers or delivering a *When Harry Met Sally*-level orgasm, Gless goes all out. In both scenes that work well and scenes that still need work, the star is a compelling presence, both brave and vulnerable.

Gless' five fellow cast members, South Florida actors all, each play multiple roles. That's a challenge for the performers, who must slip quickly from one persona to the next, and for costume designer Ellis Tillman, whose deft work helps differentiate and define characters from different eras.

Laura Turnbull plays Jane's long-dead, disapproving mother, as well as a close friend. Kim Ostrenko is another pal and Jane's literary heroine, the title character of Anthony Trollope's *Miss Mackenzie*. Howard Elfman plays a pair of Jane's elder lovers, one cruelly frank, the other a sex-hungry guy with no filter. Stephen G. Anthony plays a dismissive lover, an ailing one, a lustful loser and, in flashbacks, Jane's creepy dad. All of those actors deliver what's asked of them, but the one who truly shines is Antonio Amadeo. Most memorably, he plays Jane's estranged son (both as an angry teen and a changed man) and Graham, an intellectually compatible and ultimately irresistible guy half her age. The play's sweetest, most dramatic moments belong to Gless and Amadeo.

After a workshop version a year ago in San Francisco, *A Round-Heeled Woman* is getting its first full production at GableStage. And like most new works, the play could benefit from further tinkering.

A scene in which Jane and pals take dance lessons, followed by the occasional reappearance of their goofy instructor (Amadeo, whose sole purpose is to distract us so Jane and her man of the moment can hop into bed) just isn't needed. Truthfully, neither are the bits involving Miss Mackenzie and her cousin-suitor (Amadeo again).

Still, thanks to an inspiring true story and the charismatic star telling it, *A Round-Heeled Woman* is clearly a play with a future. You might not have as good a time watching it as Juska did living it -- but you'll come close.

Christine Dolen is The Miami Herald's theater critic.