

## A Grim Fairy Tale

By KAREN SHAPIRO

**L**oneliness, despair and the madness implicit in the threat of a nuclear holocaust were the very palpable themes of Barking Rooster Theater's performance of *Elise Saw Something No One Else Did*, which played for three consecutive evenings last weekend at the First Street Playhouse. The show, which ran slightly under an hour, consisted of three solo performances by Margo Lee Sherman, one of the leading actresses in the New York experimental theater. All of the pieces were written especially for Sherman by Avram Patt. Patt founded Barking Rooster theater in 1974. From its base in central Vermont, the company has produced a number of original plays which have been performed in New York City, New England, Canada and the Midwest. Barking Rooster Theater's appearance in Ithaca is part of First Street's Arts Activists Cabaret Series, which brings a handful of localized theatrical talent from all parts of the country to perform original, politically minded drama in Ithaca.

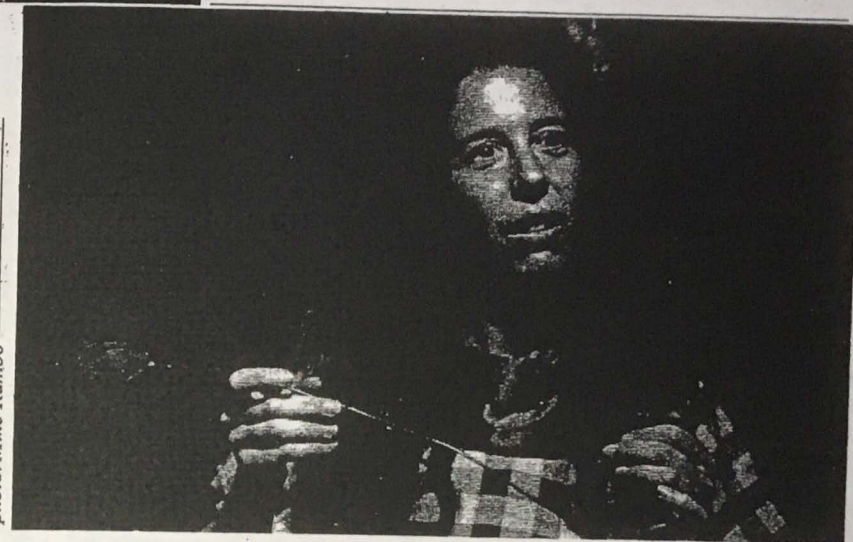
We were first introduced to Sherman in "Chicken Soup Sonata," a monologue delivered by an old woman who offers us advice gleaned from the experiences of her lifetime. Sherman slowly ambled onto the stage, dressed in bright turquoise slippers, a housedress, an apron covered with roses and a tattered kitchen cap: the epitome of poverty, loneliness and disarray.

The monologue was meant to be comic as well as thought-provoking. Although Sherman performed the piece as skillfully as any actor could have—she literally became the complaining old woman—the piece lacked originality, and the truly funny remarks were too infrequent. The old woman's best (and funniest) advice was, "Don't buy on credit." At least this advice

seemed to hit home with the Ithaca audience. She also rambled on about how terrible the world has become, reminisced about the good old days, and criticized people for lacking common sense. To her mind, people were always rushing around in circles, chasing after one another, but never stopping to enjoy the beauty of life. She was the kind of woman who complained incessantly, apologized for complaining, and then said, "I know people who complain all the time, and I can't stand them." This sort of piece has been done before, and Patt's version of it smacked of its greatest problem: it reduces older people to cultural stereotypes, thereby reinforcing them, rather than offering us fresh perspectives. Yet, thematically, this was a good opening piece for the evening's trilogy. It raised the larger question, "What is the purpose of life?"

### After the Bomb

Next, in "After the Fact" we meet Linda, a woman in a white nightgown and quilted blue bathrobe with a mass of tangled hair. She sits in a chair surrounded by a host of canned and dry foods, reciting the words of the song popularized by Jerry Lewis's annual telethon: "When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high..." Soon it becomes clear that Linda is not quite in her right mind; she is trying to come to grips with the fact that she is the sole survivor of her family and friends after a nuclear attack. The piece's intensity was extreme; its insanity was reinforced with mad poetics. Sherman played the character with a brilliant lunacy which alternated between catatonia, the maniacal chanting of a religious prayer, condemning "the makers of war," and the secure cataloguing of her remaining possessions: tuna fish, cigarettes, evaporated milk, Stay Free Maxi-Pads... Sherman's portrayal of Linda, surrounded by the



photo/Mike Rambo

vacuum-packed remains of that which once lived, was an awesome and disturbing performance.

The show closed with "Elise Saw Something No One Else Did": literally, the end of the world. This highly creative and diverse piece demanded every ounce of energy, intelligence, concentration and feeling on the parts of both Sherman and her audience. The performance was a montage of several very different theatrical approaches. Sherman began the scene by darting across the stage and disappearing into the opposite wing. She repeated this maneuver several times. Next, she appeared in a corner of the stage, holding a red rose. In a childish voice she sang Cole Porter's "Anything Goes." Afterward she presented herself as a sort of stand-up comic, speaking about love and human relationships in a world of international crises. She then left the stage, and from the wing, recited a litany of several dozen beginnings of common fairy tales. This episode was especially enchanting. Next she returned to the stage holding a little red devil-doll. Eventually she was ranting and speaking

in tongues and darting crazily across the stage. The piece ended with Elise's story. The bomb had just been dropped in a nearby city; Elise, who works at a newstand, does not, like everyone else, dash down into the shelters. Instead, she rides up the elevator of the skyscraper and plants herself in the highbacked swivel chair of an executive's corner office. From the top of the world, she sees the guided missile on the horizon and awaits its approach. The final lighting is done in such a way that the retinal effect causes Sherman to appear to vaporize. It is startling.

Sherman gave an excellent performance throughout. She has a strong, well-trained theatrical voice and a commanding stage presence. She demonstrated fine control of and confidence in her material. The intensity and despair of the evening was, however, somewhat overwhelming. Had Patt infused some hope into his view of the world—as it is, and as it is to come—the show would have been more balanced. To state the nuclear issue in terms of "To be or not to be" is too simplistic an assessment. Patt's was a very grim fairy tale. □