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Arts

Onstage: Review: *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead*

One-woman show at Playhouse is an acting tour de force

BY [Rick Pender](#) | Posted 01/18/2008

Don't be fooled by the artwork promoting the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's U.S. premiere of Australian playwright Robert Hewett's *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead*. It shows three identical faces, differentiated only by hair color -- blonde, brunette and red.

That's a subtle tip that one actress plays all three roles. But what it doesn't tell you is that actress Annalee Jeffries so distinguishes each character that a casual theatergoer who's unaware of the task Hewett's script sets for a solo actress wouldn't realize that the same person is taking on each role.

In fact, Jeffries plays all seven characters in this fascinating play. You'll have more fun watching it if I don't tell you much about them, but suffice it to say that they range across gender and age.

Director Mark Lamos makes sure that Jeffries sharply defines and distinguishes each character. Thanks to the clever set design by Andrew Jackness and **subtle lighting assistance from Thomas C. Hase**, we watch this versatile actress evolve from character to character. Between each of eight monologues she goes behind one of six panels that become transparent. We watch her in silhouette as she changes costumes, wigs and a touch of makeup, then steps back onstage as an astonishingly different character.



Sandy Underwood

Annalee Jeffries is a one-woman tour de force at the Playhouse.

The story seems mundane at first. Rhonda Russell (the redhead), a very average and naive woman, has been informed by her husband that he's moved out. But what spins out from that event is a long way from mundane -- and certainly not what it seems as described in Rhonda's show-opening monologue.

We get more of the story from Lynette, Rhonda's trashy and manipulative next-door neighbor. But it doesn't stop there, and before the end of the play's two 55-minute acts, our heads are spun around several times -- and we see Rhonda in a very different light. It's how life works, in fact, and the way we understand it, bit by bit.

Hewett's script is ingeniously written, and watching it is like peeling an artichoke, especially when you get down to its delicate heart. I wish that at least one character was presented more sympathetically; it's hard to like any of them on a sustained basis, and that makes it tougher to fully engage in the storytelling.

Nevertheless, Jeffries' constant invention of memorable characters and the steady stream of story revelations carefully set forth by Lamos' deliberate direction provide more than enough material to sustain interest right up to the show's surprisingly insightful conclusion.

Of course Jeffries changes wigs and costumes (Candice Donnelly's designs further define the wildly different characters), but she also shifts personas in terms of her voice and her physical presence. It's an acting tour de force.

This play could just as easily have been presented on the Playhouse's smaller Shelterhouse stage, but expanding it for the spacious Marx allows some inventive elements -- the stage, cluttered with an array of different chairs at the outset becomes more stark and spare with each monologue -- in addition to marvelously executed video projections (by Peter Nigrini) of images that remind audiences of key elements in each monologue. Sound designer David Stephen Baker and composer John Gromada enhance the production's auditory angle, too.

The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead is a play that will remain with you -- a remarkable acting performance. And if you pay close attention, you'll be treated to a story that has the breath of real life.

Critics Pick