

Lifestyle



Saturday
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REVIEW

Script, cast make 'Lurleen' a success

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

At the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Barbara Lebow's absorbing "Lurleen" is an intricate tapestry of formal and substantive elements which at first glance seem incongruous.

Why, for instance, would a play about Alabama's woman governor employ a chorus of Japanese women as a structural and — ultimately — a psychological technique? In Lebow's hands the at-first-sight odd technique comes to have an air of inevitability.

Overall, however, the engrossing play takes a more usual form, a reminiscence gossip of old friends. Four women, longtime intimates of the late governor, have the play's opening and closing scenes and establish a tone of loving warmth which permeates the telling of the life. These four metamorphose into the masked, kimono-clad Japanese women.

This chorus grows naturally out of the post-Pearl Harbor setting of the early scenes. From that associative beginning, they become the metaphor for subservient wives, protective mothers and other themes of the play. Moreover, they serve as an externalizing means for Lurleen's interior life and as witnesses to her growth in these areas for which they stand as metaphor.

Though based in biographical fact, the play is in no sense a biography, per se. It is, rather, a revelation of a woman through an exteriorization of her interior life. We watch her grow as she searches for an answer to

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Lurleen: Monica Bell a marvel as ex-governor

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who she is. We observe the disparity between the public and private person, the struggle between these two.

When she is first governor her housekeeper and friend, Martha, remarks, "You still ain't found your own words yet." At the play's end she has found them, and the chorus can assert, "He (George) learned about forgiveness from her."

A forceful cast supports Monica Bell in the title role. Conan McCarthy is unusually effective in conveying the bantam-rooster belligerence of George Wallace.

Chris Nixon is an outstanding Gerald in a surprising characterization of this enigmatic figure.

The protean Philip Pleasants is a warmly endearing Henry Burns, Lurleen's father.

As Martha, Rochelle Hogue is almost painfully moving in a scene in which she reveals to Lurleen her confusion as an older black person in the turmoil of early 60s Alabama.

For several seasons Monica Bell has offered ASF audiences outstanding portrayals in both Shakespearean and modern works. One hesitates to say that a particular role is her best. Yet, in this title role she achieves a seamless fusion of traits into a living, breathing Lurleen. This is not necessarily to say a historical Lurleen, but rather a dynamic, believable character. It is a carefully thought-through performance, but its intellectual underpinning, have been completely sublimated to the emotional reality of the character, the reality which strikes us with such force. Hers is a stunning performance.

Allan Swafford has taught the actor, advocated theater productions and reviewed local theater

WANT TO GO?

- **What:** "Lurleen" by Barbara Lebow
- **When:** 2 and 8 p.m. today, 7:30 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. April 2, 8 p.m. April 9 and 17, 2 p.m. April 18, 2 and 8 p.m. April 24, 2 p.m. April 25, 7:30 p.m. April 29, 2 p.m. May 1, 8 p.m. May 8, 2 p.m. May 9, 8 p.m. May 15 and June 11, 7:30 p.m. June 16, 2 p.m. June 19 and 20, 7:30 p.m. June 24, 8 p.m. June 25, 2 p.m. July 3, 7:30 p.m. July 14, 8 p.m. July 16, 8 p.m. July 17, 2 p.m. July 23 and 8 p.m. July 24
- **Where:** Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Blount Cultural Park off Woodmere Boulevard
- **Admission:** Tickets range from \$26 to \$29 with discounts for military, senior citizens, students and groups.