

'Lurleen' mixes history with myth in a most rewarding production

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

"Lurleen," the new play from the Southern Writers! Project, opened over the weekend at Alabama Shakespeare Festival to play in repertory in the Octagon.

Alabamians with long memories usually have a fixed opinion about Lurleen Burns Wallace, the state's first woman governor. Forbidden by the state constitution to succeed himself as governor in the 1966 election, the story goes, Wallace had his wife, otherwise little qualified, elected in his place — an example of Southern politics at its most ruthless. She subsequently died in office in 1968.

Such are the bare facts. But folklorists tell us that forty or so years after a person's death, historical fact is replaced by myth. The myth of Scott and Zelda, for instance, has gotten out of control, and ASF blessedly leaves that myth alone. In their place, Mrs. Wallace is ripe for rehabilitation.

The job has been entrusted to Barbara Lebow, an Atlanta playwright. Her deeply felt play about WWII refugees, "A Shayna Maidel" was a great success at Theatre AUM. But neither an Alabamian nor a Southerner originally, she would seem an odd choice to write this quintessentially Alabama story, especially as Alabama researchers and TV people (in Tuscaloosa, for instance) have presented the

Wallace story so well.

Along the way then, a strong sense of Alabama atmosphere gets lost. George is made to be the villain of the piece because of his womanizing, but there is little seen of his considerable charm and charisma. Much is made of the fact that Ms. Lebow interviewed Lurleen's family and friends, trying to uncover the real woman under her myth as the pawn of her husband. Much of Ms. Lebow's work over the years have been with "disenfranchised" people (prisoners, addicts), and she says that the play "Lurleen" is about "a woman who loses her identity and then finds it again." According to the play, George decides not to have his wife run for governor, taking her life in her own hands, she agrees to run on her own and raise the money herself for registration.

The form of the play is chronological, with brief scenes following each other, with the addition of a somewhat arty chorus of Japanese women in kimonos. They supposedly symbolize the subordinate role in Lurleen's marriage. The line between symbol and stereotype is a fine one, and the analogy here is unobtrusive, deriving from Puccini, rather than real, post-war Japanese women. Members of the chorus transform themselves into a body of Lurleen's friends, who also comment on the action.

The play is directed by Frank Wittow, whose bio was not supplied, but I understand he comes from the Alliance The-

atre in Atlanta and has directed other plays of Ms. Lebow. Assistant director Jennifer Hebbethwaite — first as a graduate student and then as ASF's literary associate — saw the play through the development process. The multi-leveled abstract set by Robert N. Schmidt seems unnecessarily big for the acting space, but maybe it's designed to travel.

Among the players, Monica Bell, in the title role, one of our fine classical actors, seems oddly subdued (except in one shouting match with George) and has not yet made the role her own. Perhaps the role hasn't much substance. Conan McCarthy, a newcomer this season as George, is one-dimensional in his depiction of one of the most vital politicians of our time, no matter what you may think of his politics. McCarthy needs help with wearing his uniform properly; for one thing, it used to be the "brown shoe" Air Corps. Although this is determinedly not a political play or documentary. I missed the sound of Wallace's own voice in "voice over" sections.

As the family retainer, Martha, Rochelle Hogue (miscast in "When We Were Married") had the only believable accent in the show, and she played with great warmth and dignity. Let's hope she's used more often. I also liked self-deprecating Chris Mixon as George's brother Gerald. Veteran Philip Pleasants wielded a mean fishing pole as Lurleen's father, Henry Burns, in one of the few scenes that got a laugh.



Monica Bell and Conan McCarty as Lurleen and George Wallace in Alabama Shakespeare Festival's world premiere production of *Lurleen*, by Barbara Lebow, in repertory through July 24.

Photo: ASF/Scarsbrook

I saw the play at the preview to which members of the Alabama Legislature had been invited.

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