

TheaterWeek

November 9, 1992/\$3.00

Sheros — One indication of the increasing importance of the solo monologue as definitive downtown performance form is its commercial viability: John Leguizamo has just opened *Spic-O-Rama* at the Westside Theater, and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* is still playing at the Perry Street Theater. Another indication is the acceptance of solo performance at such institutions as the Public Theater. Last season, David Greenspan and Anna Deavere Smith both worked the form there, and this October, Ann Magnuson has continued the new tradition with her one-woman show *You Could Be Home Now*.

Magnuson recently joined other performance artists in a production at the Kitchen devoted to women heroes. The *Sheros* was four nights of women performers organized by the Kitchen's new performance curator, David Leslie, who also contributed a video to the show. Performance, maintaining a wary distance from the theater world and a hopeful proximity to the post-modern art world, tends to be "curated" more than produced.

Like other similarly designed downtown events—the *Avant Gardè-Aramas* at P.S. 122 and Home's *No Shame* series at the Public—*Sheros* is more vaudeville variety show than museum exhibit, a series of mostly solo turns variously based on dance, song, stand-up comedy, poetry, clowning, acting, or any combination of the above. Each installment featured Dancenoise—Anne Iobst and Lucy Sexton—who on the opening night were clad in black outfits suggesting sci-fi super-hero witches. In typical Dancenoise style, which is rough-edged but manically energized, the duo quickly conjured up a modern "shero" mythology, ranging from James Bond-movie killer bimbos to Camille Paglia and a Madonna-Sinéad dispute. "Do we have to attack each other?" Sexton asks rhetorically. Of course they do, only to make up again to a recording of kitsch pop music ("The Wind Beneath My Wings"). They happily ride off together on broomsticks.

What followed was an assortment of one-woman acts. Bonnie Wiseman was a silent, clown-nosed female Jesus who steps down from her cross to perform a comic last supper ritual, complete with matzoh and cigarettes. Kimberly Flynn did a yoga-influenced floor dance in a sequined halter top while her recorded voice gave a bittersweet reminiscence of a childhood adoration of Cinderella: "Let me dream again of the glass slipper." Jasmine came out in a feather green boa and the persona of a wise-cracking stand-up philosopher. "When you get to be my age," she said early on, "you start getting older." Eileen Myles, who comes to performance as an affective but acerbic poet, marked the last leg of her write-in presidential campaign with a commencement poem she delivered last spring, as well as a two-minute "final statement" she would have delivered at the recent presidential debates. Sally Greenhouse stood behind a television set, placed chest high, which showed in tight closeup a woman giving herself a breast examination. She related the unnerving story of woman celebrated by television newsmen for undergoing a "preventive amputa-

tion": a double mastectomy. Lisa Lerner, in sequined western wear and a pink stetson, played guitar and sang, in a beautifully clear alto, lesbian "cowboy-girl" love songs that ranged somewhere between bawdy and tasteless.

Ann Magnuson turned in the most theatrically effective performance. Her four short monologues, like those of Assurbanipal Babilla, veered back and forth from wry realism to limitless, enticing fantasy.

Sheros wants to set down an authoritative account of New York women's performance—a taking stock, really, of 1992 feminist sensibility. In general, it walks a line between the cool cynicism which characterized '80s performance and a certain post-ACT-UP rediscovery of activist sincerity. That is in itself quite interesting, but beyond that, these performances point out some of the limits of the solo performance form.

First, there is an almost unconscious, but persistent, reliance on popular media: Pop songs easily blast out on the p.a., and in David Leslie and Larry Fressenden's video *That's What She Said* (interspersed in bits throughout the evening), the role of woman hero seems inordinately weighted in favor of mass media stars (Bette Davis, Meryl Streep, Cher, Jane Fonda, Janis Joplin, Madonna). These figures certainly offer good video, but there's something disquietingly unsubstantial about media heroes—or sheros.

Secondly, the giant empty stage at the Kitchen showed how visually limiting the solo performance can be as theater. With few exceptions (Dancenoise's full-stage cavortings and Bonnie Wiseman's two-story crucifix), the pieces that constituted *Sheros* never attempted to deal with the immense physical proportions of the Kitchen's stage. Would making the entire stage space vibrant cross over the invisible line between performance and theater?