

THEATER REVIEW

4 Women (And Who Needs Any Men?)

By MARGO JEFFERSON

There are still too few plays that grant women an equal opportunity to be compelling. Not just above and beyond their relations to men, but also beyond the sentimental and the formulaic feminine: mothers and daughters who meet at the beauty shop, say, or single women who've found professional success but still wish and hope for romantic fulfillment.

Those plots tend to be self-enclosed; there is no outside world that either the characters or the audience need acknowledge. What a pleasure, then — and how moving it is — to see Rona Munro's "Bold Girls," which opened last night at the 29th Street Rep in Chelsea, where it runs through Oct. 18.

The time is 1990. The place is a cramped house in a Roman Catholic section of Belfast, Northern Ireland, where hearing gunshots and seeing buses in flames are as common as finding baby sitters and doing laundry. (That laundry — sheets, napkins, pants — stretches from the stage to the theater's back walls).

The characters are four women whose lives are a jumble of the everyday and the extreme. They watch "Blind Date," "The Accused" and, as one character says, "Nightmare on Elm Street 365." They talk about diets. They complain about the British soldiers who trample their gardens, about the news reports that tell them nothing about explosions they hear just blocks away and about the roadblock that could make going to the local nightclub impossible. No men are in sight: their husbands and brothers are dead or in prison.

Marie (Susan Barrett) has been a widow for two and a half years; she is shapely, plump and stoically good-hearted. Her friend Cassie (Heidi James) is tart, defiantly skinny and watchful. Both have small children. Nora (Paula Ewin) is Cassie's mother. She has jaunty good sense as well as an angry streak of prudishness.

These capsule descriptions oversimplify, though. What Ms. Munro gets so beautifully is the mix of instinct (our natural temperaments),



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Susan Barrett, left, Paula Ewin and Heidi James as Belfast women in Rona Munro's "Bold Girls."

BOLD GIRLS

By Rona Munro; directed by Ludovica Villar-Hauser; sets by Mark Symczak; costumes and graphic designs, Christopher Lione; lighting by Douglas Cox; sound and original music by Tim Cramer; production stage manager, Cesar Malantic; assistant director, Zetna Fuentes; dialect coach, Stephen Gabis; additional original music, Susan McKeown. Presented by the 29th Street Rep, Tim Corcoran and David Mogentale, artistic directors. At 212 West 29th Street, Chelsea.

WITH: Moira MacDonald (Deirdre), Susan Barrett (Marie), Paula Ewin (Nora) and Heidi James (Cassie).

conditioning (what life does to us) and calculation (how we juggle the two). Marie is truly generous, even a bit naïve. (The others tease her for feeding birds every day.) But a certain level of naïveté is her shield. She permits herself only loving memories of Michael, her husband; the children need them, yes, but more to the point, she does. Those memories are her survival mechanism.

Cassie is a rebel. She'll admit that she hates her husband and dreads his release from prison; she loves to look sexy and dance when she goes nightclubbing. Like so many rebels who stay at home, though, she craves approval — especially from those (like her mother) who won't grant it.

As for Nora, after plenty of harsh, grueling years, she has learned to compensate and sublimate. If the

content of your life is all wrong, get the form right; she will decorate her front room exactly the way she wants.

When the teenage Deirdre (Moira MacDonald) knocks on Marie's door, asking for shelter, she rattles the women (and us) because Marie believes that she is a ghost. Marie has told Cassie about a young girl who haunts her street at odd hours and looks like her dead husband. We have already seen Deirdre's face at the window, like the ghost of Cathy in "Wuthering Heights." We have heard her speak, in a kind of trance: "I'm wet, I'm cold. I want to get inside. There's burning, making the sky black. The sky's full of rain and the sound of the helicopter. I want to get inside. Can't keep me out."

Now she tells them her name. Her mother, she says, is "out." She says she hasn't been hanging around Marie's house. She asks to take a shower, and comes back wearing Marie's clothes. When the women go to the nightclub, Deirdre is a waitress there.

Does the plot hinge on the mystery of Deirdre or on the certainty of war in Belfast? No, in both cases, and this is the core of Ms. Munro's talent. There is a perfect balance between what happens to the women and what happens inside them. Their impulses are as dangerous as gunshots; their personal secrets are as risky as their husbands' political ones. And this balance is matched by

the ensemble work of the four actors. Together and apart, their work is emotionally rich and full of moving details.

Ludovica Villar-Hauser directs with an alert eye and an even hand. Leisure gives way to tension, then to wary ease, then to tenderness. No small moment is sacrificed to a larger one. My only quibble is with the staging of several soliloquies. There is something stilted about that moment when a character steps out of the scene and faces us to talk. And is she speaking to herself, to us or both? (I sensed some wavering.)

What a good writer Ms. Munro is. She moves from quick, pointed dialogue to intimate soliloquies; from taut but lyrical metaphors to witty vernacular. Marie asks Cassie if she and her mother have "fallen out," and Cassie answers, "My mother and I fell out on the delivery room floor," while Nora calls Cassie a child "with a heart of flint and a tongue to match." But of course they joke and tease; of course Cassie loves boasting about how Nora stood up to British soldiers. All of this goes on simultaneously, day after day. Marie is a kind of balm, but she's no patsy. She has a temper, and she turns out to be a match for the wild Deirdre.

We feel the contradictions inside and between these women at each moment. We feel their struggle to improvise within the implacable boundaries of their world.