

Theatre Review: "Moon" Soars With Spirit

By LAUREL SIMON

Theatre or planetarium? Audience seating or airfield? The University of Oklahoma's Weitzenhoffer Theatre became both this weekend as Laurel Ollstein's world premiere play of "They Promised Her the Moon" swept through. Directed by Judith Midyett Pender, "Moon" earnestly tells the true story of how a young Oklahoma girl became one of the world's best pilots and dreamed of exploring outer space, only to have her hopes frustrated by sexist politics.

As the OU School of Drama's Faith Broome Playwright-in-Residence, Ollstein received the opportunity to spend a year on campus teaching classes, developing the script, and working with the cast. She has previously taught at several colleges and contributes as actor, director, and playwright to drama groups such as the Playwright's Arena.

Her efforts here have yielded a charming, accessible production. Although the storyline for "Moon" was not without its bumps, as is to be expected from any new production, an outstanding cast and mesmerizing technical elements turned the show into a witty and memorable look at one woman's brave journey to pursue flying.

To begin the play, Ollstein places Geraldyn "Jerrie" Cobb in the middle of her story, while she is experiencing scientific tests to prove her aptitude for space travel. Jerrie lies in the middle of the floor as though she is in an isolation tank, and drifts in and out of both flashbacks and flashforwards that piece together the hardships she has faced as a female pilot in the 1950s.

We see Jerrie as a young girl with a heavy speech impediment, preferring to sit in silence and stare at the stars rather than communicate with schoolteachers. We ride along as she takes her first flight at age 12, and subsequently accepts a job with the circus in order to get more time in a plane. And much later in her life, we cringe as John Glenn testifies to the Senate against her that women are not fit for space travel and that their astronaut qualifications should be negated.

Though Jerrie never made it to space, these episodes formed a powerful picture of a woman with an intensely pure passion for flying who was nonetheless an American hero for her courage and skill.

Lindsey Sawyer, as Jerrie, gave a quietly striking performance that communicated Jerrie's single-minded determination in the midst of chaos. Although proving herself distant to news reporters and her own mother, Sawyer's character came across as open and accessible to the audience. Jerrie was someone we could know, not just know about.

As her rival female pilot Jackie Cochran, Kelcie Miles was sassy and a touch world-weary, able to silence the enthusiasm of Connor Wilson's Dr. Lovelace with one look. Her character provided a more dimensional contrast to Jerrie than did

Amelia Earhart, played by Emily Jackson, as too often Earhart's appearances revolved around callous diatribes that failed to connect with Jerrie.

Luckily, the show had another successful foil in the disarmingly cool astronaut John Glenn, as played with bravado by Stephen Ibach. Other notable members of the cast were an ensemble of overeager reporters who follow Jerrie around like a pack of inquisitive puppies and eat up every word she does (or does not) say, and Connor Konz as a cringing mayor who is terrified of going up in a plane.

With location jumps that range from an isolation tank to an Oklahoma field to an airplane hanger, scenic designer Ethan Hartman opted for extreme simplicity in his set, which allowed for lighting designer Eric Stehl's looks to transform the theatre in each scene. The blurred propeller painted center stage and moveable wooden crates helped create the mechanical atmosphere of Jerrie's workspace, while soft azure lights and gloriously twinkling stars overhead were able to evoke the wonder of soaring into space.

Stehl cleverly used the movement of light to build a spinning propeller effect as figures from Jerrie's past confronted her in the second act, as well as using shadows to simulate a plane flyover that was astonishingly realistic in Alan Hiserodt's sound design.

"They Promised Her the Moon" is both a story of ambition and ambitious in its own goals. As such, there are several elements that could have been eliminated in order to streamline the story and increase the script's coherence. Although the timeline of play, despite its nonlinearity, makes sense, episodes with the Senate are too brief to adequately summarize what happened when Jerrie is denied the chance to fly to outer space.

Also confusing are persistent interruptions from a starstruck reporter, whose character is not explained until the very end of the play, in a section about Jerrie's philanthropic work in the Amazon. The script only partially ties up all of its storylines, though to its credit Jerrie's own story comes through clearly.

The device of the tank anchored her firmly at the center of all digressions, but where the technical design of the tank was concerned, blue squiggled projections proved to be more distracting than enhancing. Using lights to shape the space would have been sufficient.

In spite of these bumps, Ollstein's writing and vision were a wonderful showcase for the School of Drama actors and designers. The performances had a wonderful freshness, with surprising moments of humor and affectation, such as when Jerrie's father pretends to be angry with her for staying outside past her bedtime.

Both isolating and intimate at the same time, "Moon" is a breathtaking look at the intensity of an Oklahoma girl's dream. Though the character of Jackie Cochran

dismisses Jerrie as someone who wouldn't be remembered, "They Promised Her the Moon" ensures that, in fact, her story will live on.