

Top 10 performances of 2001

#4 "**Room**" (City) Created by Anne Bogart's SITI Company, this was the fourth such collaboration with City (and who knows if the connection will continue). An intellectual and imagistic dreamscape, "Room" is based on the writings and person of Virginia Woolf, extraordinarily realized by Ellen Lauren in a performance of luminosity, intelligence and painstaking physical control."

Room' to roam: Exploration of Virginia Woolf is a challenge to the imagination

Friday, January 19, 2001

By Christopher Rawson, Post-Gazette Drama Critic

Surprisingly, "Room" is not a one-woman show about Virginia Woolf. Nor is it about women.

Well, yes, it is; but not *just*.

Luminous, elegant actor Ellen Lauren does indeed "play" Virginia Woolf, and the "play" does start with the opening words of Woolf's famous "A Room of One's Own," which originated as a speech on "Women and Literature" to a group of university women.

Well, no, it actually begins with adapter Jocelyn Clarke's summary of Woolf's injunction that one needs one's own space in which to pursue the work of the imagination -- space both physical and psychic. Then it spirals off into excerpts from many Woolf works, especially her "Sketch of the Past" but including "Professions for Women," "Between the

STAGE REVIEW

'ROOM'

WHERE: City Theatre, Bingham and 13th streets, South Side.

WHEN: Through Feb. 4, Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 5:30 and 9 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m.

TICKETS: \$19-\$30 (student and senior rush \$12-\$15); 412-431-CITY

Acts" and letters and diary entries. As a cautionary intrusion there's also Charlotte Bronte's angry voice of Grace Poole, the madwoman in the attic in "Jane Eyre" -- a room of her own in another, bitter sense.

And, no, "Room" is not really a play, although it is gorgeously staged with spare authority. Just as Woolf reconceived fiction as less plotted and more internal, so conceiver/director Anne Bogart and her SITI Company have used Clarke's collage to pursue the life of the imagination through description and by showing it in action. There's no plot and no conflict except as it is stirred up in us.

So Lauren does not so much "play Woolf" as enact a journey through Woolf's thought, as re-shaped for this later century. Woolf would not "do" what Lauren so choreographically does in the course of this demanding evening.

So what is it? You might call it stand-up literature, but only in the sense that it speaks directly to the imagination. It is nothing like Patrick Garland's one-woman "A Room of One's Own," staged at the Shaw Festival last summer, which, in contrast, is just an educational reenactment, not a new creation.

Better to call "Room" a challenge to our imaginations -- an attempt at direct stimulation of our imaginative lives.

I found it hard to follow, and I know from opening-night comments it will bewilder many. But one reason I found it difficult is that its imaginative leaps kept igniting my own. In the course of 90 minutes, memories surfaced that I haven't seen for years.

"Room" dramatizes a way of thinking and a search for the thoughtful apprehension of feeling -- no, better, for the union of feeling and thought. "Truth" is what Woolf calls this difficult pursuit, the truth of the multidimensionality and essential unknowingness of even the simplest emotional moment.

So it is quite appropriate that Clarke's text demands such sudden U-turns of thought, complexly layering memory, poetry and symbols. As staged by Bogart with accumulating gestures that keep recalling previous stages in the journey, it winds toward an ecstatic climax that Woolf might call rapture.

At times, "Room" almost feels like Gertrude Stein in its sudden, subconscious shifts from expository to poetic, narrative to impressionistic. But it is like nothing so much as Woolf's fiction.

I must admit I'm not a fan of that fiction, but I'm not knowledgeable enough to be clear why. I admire in her exactly what you can admire in this show, the immediacy, delicacy and integrity of her pursuit of complex feeling.

I'm more a fan of her much older contemporary, Henry James, partly because his plots are more robust -- not so entirely internal -- and especially because he's funny, with an entertaining, aphoristic polish. But I do recognize that what strives mightily in James to be delicate thought is often more fully achieved in Woolf. I subscribe to the witticism that James "chews more than he's bitten off," but you can't say that about Woolf: She chews exactly what she's bitten off, and it's huge. She does it, I suppose (careful, Chris), in a more female way. Her work is more intuitive, finer-boned.

Since one of Woolf's concerns is the discovery of a pattern behind the vague "cotton-wool" that muffles ordinary existence, it is exciting to see her journey given such big-boned, assured form by Bogart. Neil Patel's set is a big boxy room, which proves a perfect blank page for Christopher Akerlind's fluid lighting -- occasionally soft but generally abrupt and abstract.

Through it, Lauren moves in perfect control, slipping easily from austere author to sinuous searcher. She has penetrating eyes and the ability to be simultaneously commanding and bird-like. You feel a demanding spirit within.

Most evocative of all, beyond Lauren's fascinating presence and Clarke's challenging text, is Darron West's soundscape, summoning our memories and Woolf's. A rich, shaping piano score that sounds vaguely like Satie.

This is the fourth time the New York-based SITI has been in residence at City Theatre, following "The Medium" (1996), "Culture of Desire" (1997) and "Alice's Adventures Underground" (1998). "Room" was commissioned by City and the Wexner Center at Ohio State University. It had its world premiere there in October, but this is its first extended theatrical run.

Providing a home for this demanding, unconventional art is praiseworthy -- not that it's easy watching what Bogart calls "an artist in the pressure cooker of articulation." But for those who connect, "Room" turns out to be a challenge to us all, men and women, to savor memory and probe beneath the empty skin of the everyday. We all need that room of our own.