A Man And A Woman

Of Joyce & Briggs

The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin by Steve J. Spears, directed by Richard Wherrett, starring Gordon Chater.

James Joyce's Women, written and edited by Fionnula Flanagan, staged by Burgess Meredith, starring Fionnula Flanagan.

by Robert Hurwitt

The naked, middle-aged, paunchy man, opens the play at the Alcazar, flouncing about his living room, applying lipstick and rouge, and advancing seductively upon a defenseless poster of Mick Jagger. A few blocks away, at Marines Memorial Theater, a naked woman lies on a bed, running tentative fingers over her loins as she ends her performance by reciting a truncated version of Molly Bloom's soliloquy from **Ulysses.**

Flesh apart, the two plays that opened within the same week in S.F. have other similarities. Both are imports; both are profesionally mounted productions; both are essentially one-performer shows; and both have somewhat misleading titles.

The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin by Australian playwright Steve J. Spears has little to do with elocution and nothing to do with the historical figure. This may have been of negligible importance during the play's long runs in Australia and London, but here, with reverberations of the massive bicentennial publicity campaign still sounding, the producers have been at great pains to dissociate the piece from the horny, revered old diplomat and journalist. "Definitely **not** a historical play!" The fliers state and reiterate that the play "has nothing to do with the American revolution."

But this may be an overstatement. By a nice historical accident **The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin** is a timely piece with a progressive political impact. The play concerns Robert O'Brien, a failed actor turned elocution and drama teacher in New South Wales. He is a transvestite and he is gay. He is a teacher in a state where homosexuality is illegal. He is sitting square in the bull's-eye of the Briggs Initiative -- and he suffers a direct hit.

As O'Brien, Gordon Chater turns in a performance that can only be termed masterful. He gives us a fully rounded presentation of the character, his weaknesses, his strengths, his tenderness and his bitchiness, his wit and his dignity. Chater's timing is perfect and he effectively draws on all the comedy inherent in the piece.

And he does more than that. Through inflections, through body language and even with a bit of startling sleight of hand, he succeeds in bringing to life more than a dozen other unseen characters -- pupils and parents of pupils, neighbors, and most memorably his long-time companion, Bruce. This is a tour de force of fine acting.

Spears' script, unfortunately, does not quite come up to Chater's performance. Much of the first act depends on a glib humor that grew tedious and served neither to advance the action nor to bring home the social/political message. But this is only a temporary setback and Chater's performance carries the audience through the dull spots in the script.

Towards the end of the first act he delivers a beautifully moving speech to the title character, a precocious 12-year old with the historical name, who has been attempting to seduce his teacher. O'Brien turns him down with grace and dignity in words that should be taken to heart by the voters in November.

The first act is set in the present. The second is set eight years in the future, when homosexuality is no longer illegal in Australia, a reform that has come too late for Robert O'Brien. He has not been convicted of his heinous crime. Rather he has been committed as insane and, as the movement to free him gains ground on the outside, he is slowly succumbing to the insanity of his surroundings, losing his most precious possession -- his reason.

In light of this state's (and this country's) current social situation, this is a powerful, important piece. It is well directed by Richard Wherrett of the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, and the sets, costumes and lights are excellent. Opening night saw some trouble with the sound in the second act, but that should be quickly corrected.

The technical problem that most disturbed me at **James Joyce's Women** was more serious. Lighting designer Thomas Ruzika, though doing an excellent job of lighting the playing space, didn't bother to mask the overhead stage lights from the audience. The constant glare gave me a headache before the show was half over.

As stated above, the title of this show is slightly misleading too but that seems to be a problem in the selection and presentation of the material. Fionnula Flanagan gives us six women who have some connection with the novelist -- three characters from his writings, the two women responsible for seeing **Portrait of the Artist** and **Ulysses** into print, and Nora Barnacle Joyce, his wife. A good idea that doesn't quite work.

Gordon Chater gives a masterful performance as a transvestite in "The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin."

Flanagan nicely impersonates the historical figures but makes no real effort to bring them to life, neither in her performance nor in her selection of material. Harriet Shaw Weaver, editor of the influential literary review **The Egoist,** and Sylvia Beach, the American owner of the Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Co and publisher of **Ulysses,** are used merely as vehicles for telling us something of Joyce's life and introducing the excerpts from **Finnegan's Wake** and **Ulysses.**

We learn nothing about either woman in particular and as Flanagan's accent wavers between English, Irish and American, the impersonations become alienating, coming between us and the material.

More of an effort seems to have been made to capture the personality of Nora Joyce. Certainly she is made more interesting, although even here the focus is more on Joyce than on his wife. But Joyce's letters had me expecting a more earthy woman than I saw portrayed here and this is a quality that Flanagan seems to have trouble portraying.

Director Burgess Meredith's decision to stage the Molly Bloom soliloquy in the nude, though both appropriate and appealing, may have been an attempt to draw attention away from Flanagan's inability to capture the earthiness of Milly. Indeed, her editing of the section cut some of the earthiest parts -- which seems inappropriate after she had just finished deriding the censorship of the work. What she presented was a nice reading of a magnificent piece of literature -- but it was not Molly Bloom.

There are enough enjoyable moments to make it a pleasant evening and the script contains some of the greatest writing in the English language, but Flanagan does not have Chater's capacity to carry the evening by herself. Perhaps this is why Garrett O'Connor was introduced as a ubiquitous harmonica player and commentator, but this device does not work well. His interruptions and movements do more to impede and detract from the show than to aid it.

The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin *plays at the Alcazar, 650 Geary, San Francisco, Tuesdays through Fridays at 8:30; Saturdays at 7 and 10:30 p.m.; and Sundays at 3 and 7:30 p.m.*

James Joyce's Women *plays at Marines' Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter, San Francisco, through Oct. 1 only, Friday and Saturday at 7 and 10 p.m.; Sunday at 3 and 7:30 p.m.*