

Legit Reviews

A Lie Of The Mind

(Mark Taper Forum;
767 seats; \$25 top)

Sam Shepard's play opens on the shattered side of the glass, at the bottom of the well of love after a long, dark fall, when a man has beaten his wife within an inch of her life.

While it struggles upward from this chilling place, Shepard deals with his darkest themes — among them primitive, obsessive love and the fear of abandonment, and the unshakable imprint of one soul on another in a family line or marriage.

Told in symbolic, expressionist style with heavy doses of absurdist comedy, play will provide ample fodder for those who wish to wrangle over its disparate parts, poking around for vibrations from that mysterious, shaking force we've known Shepard to unearth.

But poke around they will, with faint hope for a payoff, while the common run of man, after this oddball three-and-a-half-hour sit, will be heard to utter brave things like "very unusual" while exiting the theater with nary a backward glance.

Nor will the Taper's production, directed by frequent Shepard collaborator Robert Woodruff, be remembered as the one to cast dazzling and definitive light on this venture.

House should sell plenty of tickets based on Shepard's reputation and the presence of Holly Hunter in the cast, but word of mouth is not likely to be a driving force in sales.

Hunter's droves of fans from "Broadcast News" should be warned, too, that she's got a decidedly non-network assignment here, then come anyway to see her game-

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ly take her steps out onto a limb, as all developing artists must.

Three-act drama, which opened in New York in December 1985 and won a New York Drama Critics Award, follows the plight of Jake (John Diehl), who falls back into the bosom of his family believing he's beaten his wife to death in a jealous rage.

Victim, Beth (Holly Hunter) survives but is brain-damaged, and drawn back into her family for protection.

Result of her injuries is a mangled, truncated form of speech that gives Shepard a chance to experiment with evolving language while she slowly recovers.

Setting is the vast, snow-bladed plains of Montana, with cheap motels, lonely highways, worn family homesteads and deer-hunting country evoked suitably and simply enough in Douglas Stein's tri-level set.

Cast, which also includes Amy Madigan, James Gammon, Louise Latham, Arliss Howard, Rae Allen and Cyril O'Reilly, starts out strong and has fine moments, but frequently gets lost in play's many stagnant byways with little help from Woodruff.

Hunter is strongest when her character is nearly dead — with bandages wrapped around her head, she comes off as a ghoulish rag doll ripped by screams and giggles, with her considerable stage energy seeming to leap from beneath her skin.

But later in the play, when she's forced to wander the stage in a baggy shirt making solemn, mystical pronouncements about love in her truncated code speech, she seems to have no more clue than anyone else as to the mysterious context in which these lines might be gracefully delivered.

Louise Latham and James Gammon are a godsend here, creating most of the laughs in a cockeyed and convincing perf as Beth's off-beat parents.

Rae Allen's dour, deadpan take on Jake's widowed mother finds some humor too but seems to add weight to the stifling scenes in that house, though Amy Madigan, in a genial, boyish perf as Jake's sister does what she can to help.

Woodruff has apparently thrown up his hands at some of the problem scenes, letting them spin themselves out in loosest, dullest fashion.

He does have a fine idea at the end, though, when he expands on the human/animal theme by having Beth's brother Mike (Arliss Howard, in a very commendable turn) guide Jake, his prisoner at the end, into the living room like a plough horse, on his knees using the American flag for the plough traces.

Familiar Shepard elements surface here — people running down highways in the dark; people reduced to an animal state, tied to stoves; family members who don't recognize each other. But while miraculous goods have been woven from this material in the past, the fabric here is strained by too many tedious, extraneous scenes that tear away at momentum.

On the other hand, Shepard's penchant for threading the elemental emotions of country music through his work is well-served at the Taper by the new American folk music of L.A. singer/songwriter Peter Case and Victoria Williams, whose original compositions seem to sing with wild energy.

Music is performed onstage with a trio of stand-up bass, harmonica and the guitar and singing of excellent L.A. musician Marcos Loya.

Daws.