

'Magda': Shot in the arm for theater of ideas

by John Feffer

Theater can be dreadfully simplistic these days. From frothy musicals to ho-hum melodramas, this retreat from complexity has taken the intellectual and dramatic stuffing out of productions. According to the anti-logic borrowed from Hollywood commercialism, introducing serious ideas and themes onto the stage is pretentious, and all intellectualizing is automatically pseudo.

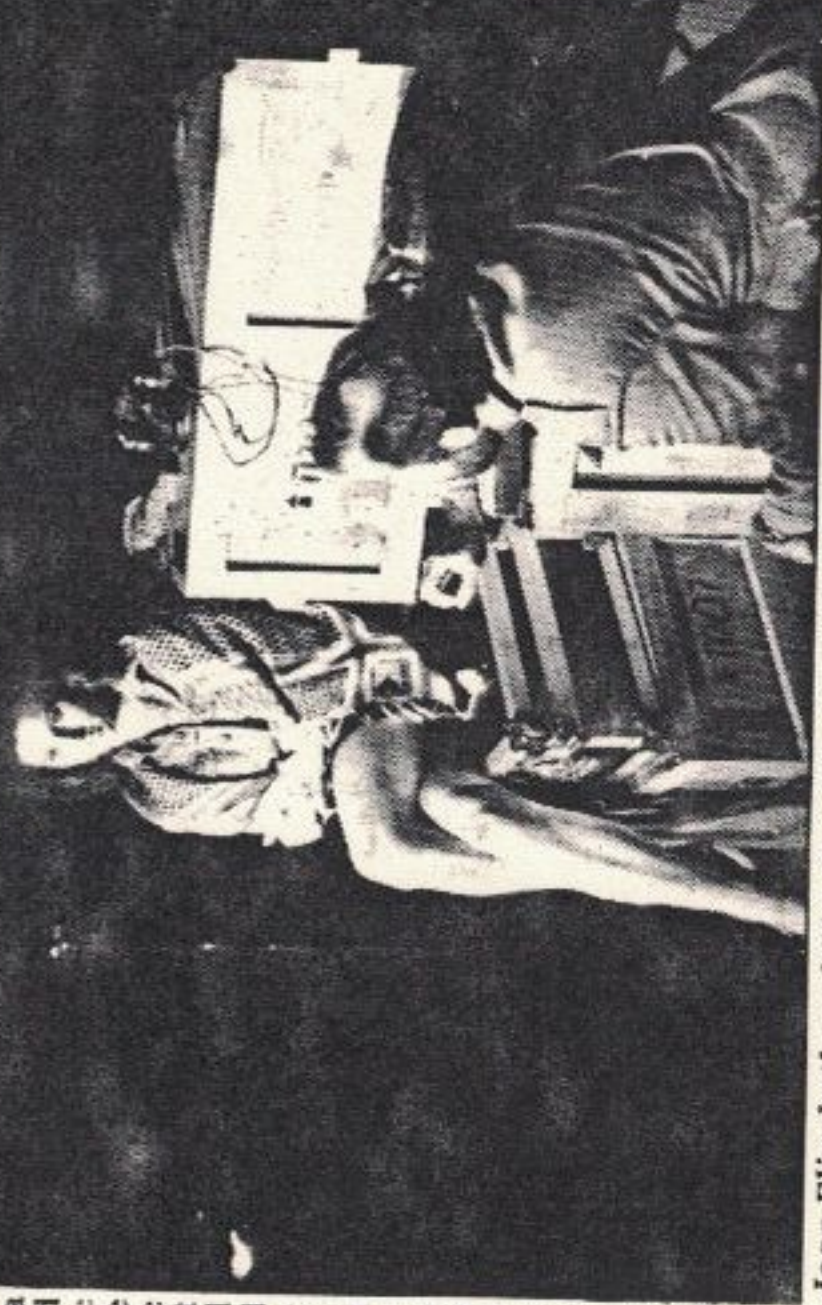
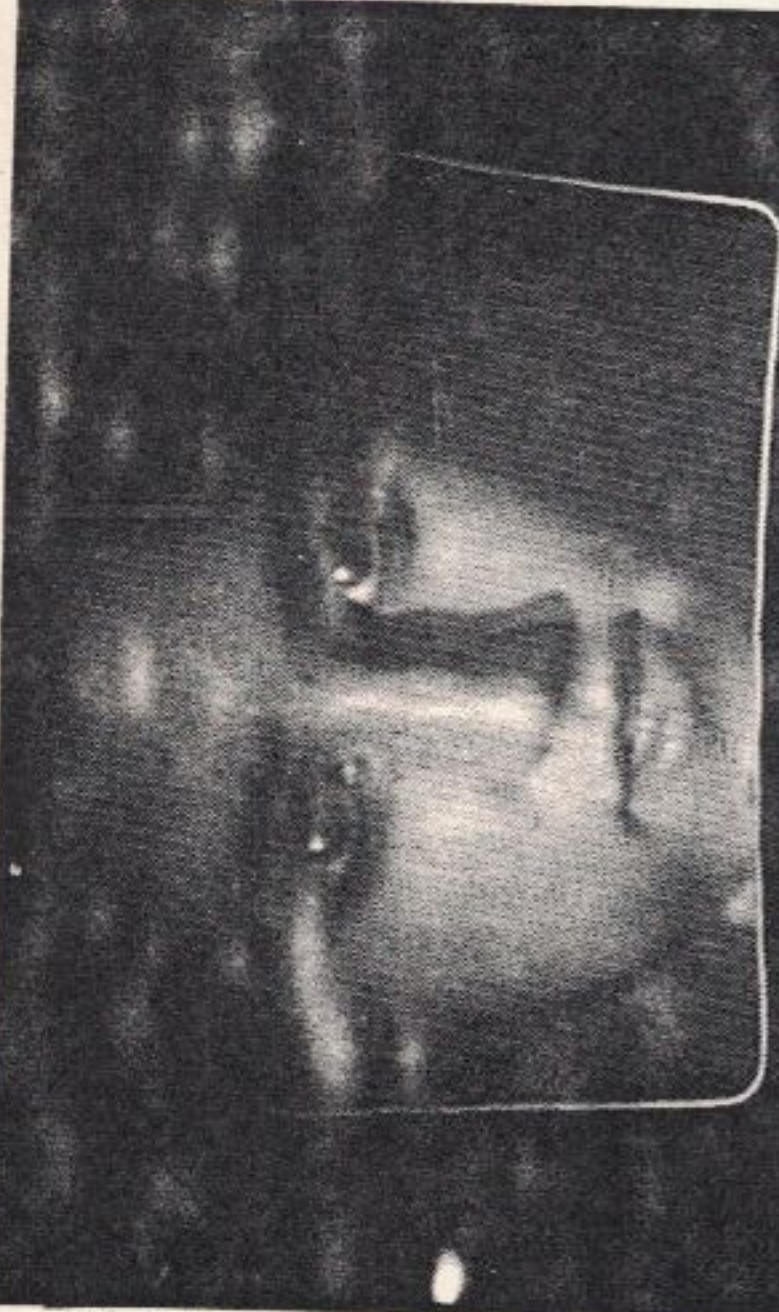
Seen against this trend, the Wilma Theater's most recent offering, *Shooting Magda*, is a refreshing change, a play controversial in presentation as well as politics. In tackling the thorny issue of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol uses a pretzel-like plot, protean characters and a delightful mixture of music, dance and video to make his points.

Ostensibly, *Shooting Magda* is about a film crew shooting the story of a Palestinian woman's love affairs and political allegiances. As the cast of the film try to sort out the truths of the screenplay, they must confront some uncomfortable truths of their own. But to describe all the various trysts and betrayals involving the 12 actors and their film personas would require something on the order of a genealogical chart.

To complicate matters, these personal liaisons take place against the background of Arab-Israeli conflicts. Sobol plays the political off the personal and vice versa. Political events serve as metaphors: the occupation of Lebanon for the intrusions of the camera crew, the occupation of the West Bank for the appropriation of personal histories like Magda's. So, too, can the various dynamics of the Middle East situation be discerned in the personal lives of the characters.

Such politicking, especially on this set of issues, is unusual for the American stage. For an American theater production to deal with the Palestinian issue, even to mention the word on stage, is quite a bold step.

But the play is not simply an exercise in international relations. Nor does *Shooting Magda* remain content with exploring the fictional self-referentiality



Joan Elizabeth and Tim Moyer in *Shooting Magda*: Dual roles and levels of meaning

of the film-within-a-play game. Instead, an entire production entertaining as a successful blend emerges; The politics well.

As can be imagined, the acting in such dramatic shuffling and multiple meanings make the politics palatable; and the non-stop barrage of mixed media

performer must be attuned to the two roles he or she plays, as well as the moments when the personas stop.

The supporting actors, such as Charles Techniman (Havkin, Herbert) and Ahvi Spindell (Udi, David), are especially adept at this. As a side *shtick*, Giovanni Moscardino (Fahed, Adnan) gives a delightfully irreverent Groucho Marx-as-rabbi.

The leads, however, tend to be too studied when they should be natural, too melodramatic when they should be understated.

The cramped set works well. Twelve people crowded onto such a small stage introduce just the right note of claustrophobia for a play bulging with competing ideologies, nationalities and technologies.

With a production that throws so much at the audience, however, a certain amount of dross is to be expected. The triteness of the film script sometimes intrudes into the play's "real" dialogue. Perhaps Sobol is making a point about the clichés we take from art and apply to our lives. Perhaps. But that doesn't make either the art or the lives any more interesting to watch.

Shooting Magda has a more important failing, however: its rather conventional and uninspiring final message. Politics may be complex—and theater too—but don't take it all too seriously. Sobol warns us, and for heaven's sake, don't kid yourself into thinking you can change the world.

Technological wizardry and narrative virtuosity aside, *Shooting Magda* has a human heart that beats through all the politics with simple rhythms of love and personal integrity. But these central homilies are really out of keeping with the overall style of the play.

Through an extraordinary act of condensation, Sobol has juggled several plays' worth of themes and ideas, only a small portion of which have been touched upon in this review. With *Shooting Magda*, the Wilma Theater has repudiated the Hollywood syndrome and given a shot of intelligence and substance to its schedule.

Shooting