

# The New Bijou Soft Shoe

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*The New Bijou Soft Shoe*

is an infuriatingly devious play by Warren John Deacon, filled with sudden swerves and shuffles of imagination and abrupt shifts of plot, as difficult to pin down as a drop of mercury. And the most startling surprise of all comes at the final curtain when only four actors parade out for their bows. The stage had seemed peopled by an entire gallery, partly because the characters had assumed so many guises and disguises in their running battle with reality and partly because the set itself — the backstage area of a once-grand legitimate theatre, now reduced to showing porno films

(which is surely one of the best Robert W. Zentis has ever designed in a career that grows more exciting with each new production) — had seemed alive with ghosts from the past.

But there are only four. One, an old man, doing a good impersonation of all old men (but played too listlessly by Howard Whalen to be the former Shakespearian actor the script demands). He feeds on the remembered glories of his youth and keeps his mind from the endless pornography on the screen by compulsively trying to collect those memories into a play, as if to leave a record of his past will somehow give meaning to his present.

The other characters enter his real world and his play as if on cue. Miriam is an emotional derelict who adopts the name of Ellen Terry and takes refuge in the glamour the old man bestows on her. Paul Gregory makes his acting debut as the young boy who makes his debut in the man's play, but the role is a too obvious symbol of innocence and is still so undefined that Gregory flounders badly even in its shadows. The last of the four, the projectionist (a deeply true performance by Dominic De Fazio), is a prisoner

of his own lack of imagination who tries to warm himself on the coals of theirs but pulls back rather than be burned.

It is nice to see director Bill Bartman, who has always had — and again has — a facility and flair for staging, get two such reverberant performances. But he distorts the play, which is really a strange bedfellow blend of drama and burlesque, a sort of tragic olio, by playing every scene in the same naturalistic style. That tends to blanket the play with reality and to smother its more fanciful moments.

His whole object, too, has been to clarify the play, while writer Deacon's has been to keep it obscure, to prestidigitate with time and point of view, like some latter-day Pirandello. In other words, Deacon is satisfied with the play as a series of concentric circles, while Bartman is always looking for their center. And that opposition is never resolved to the good of the play.

But more important is the genuine love Deacon shows for his characters and the strong dramatic line Bartman manages to sustain, all the while saying something passably worth hearing about the illusions of youth, the humiliation of age and the perseverance of us all to put up with it all. It is the kind of play that, despite its almost juvenile excesses, leaves an itch in the mind that no amount of intellectual scratching can satisfy. The theatre can always use plays like that:

### The New Bijou Soft Shoe

"The New Bijou Soft Shoe" is a play strictly for fanatics of the theatre. This uneven new comedy by Warren John Deacon (former managing director of the South Coast Repertory) recalls "The Entertainer" in its cynical but nostalgic portrait of an old actor on his last legs.

Howard Whalen creates an authentically gritty character as Mobey, the former Shakespearean actor now reduced to being janitor of a porno film theatre. Whalen has Mobey's distracted mannerisms, slightly slurred speech and antic energy down to perfection.

With excellent physical design and lighting by Robert W. Zentis, the play evokes a constant stream of theatrical memories through its backstage setting and Deacon's amusing use of dramatic allusions. "I absorb," Mobey snaps when he is accused of plagiarism, and the same could be said by Deacon.

The central relationship is that between Mobey and the young Lyle, a callow theatrical apprentice likably played by Gregory Tyler. Though the character is thinly developed, Tyler makes a brash but compassionate foil to the old actor.

The flippant Bijou projectionist is nicely played by Dominic De Fazio, who has a touching and funny scene in which he recalls his absurd song in an almost-forgotten grade school play.

The soft shoe finale, with Mobey getting his chance to perform for a hostile audience when the projector breaks down, is highly poignant. Zentis' evocative design for the Bijou stage adding largely to the effect. Zentis also directed the porno films used in production and one of his clever satires drew applause from the first-night crowd.

Mack.

