



MOORE & FERRELL IN SEA HORSE

Spars and Scars

THE SEA HORSE
by JAMES IRWIN

Big, fat, frumpy Gert is as disconcertingly direct as the belaying pin with which she flattens obstreperous patrons of her waterfront bar. If one of the seamen who frequent her place takes her sexual fancy, she issues a pointblank invitation to him to follow her upstairs. In recent months she has limited her favors to a virile ship's engineer named Harry, who possesses an unholy thirst and an unquenchable lust. Harry (Edward J. Moore) is as lean as Jack Sprat, and he and Gert (Conchata Ferrell) form the oddly discrepant, frantically energetic alliance of a harbor tug docking an ocean liner.

On this particular shore leave Harry has undergone a sea change, and out of that change and its effects 38-year-old "James Irwin" (actually Edward J. Moore under a pseudonym) has fashioned a first play that is robust, touching, funny and nakedly honest. *The Sea Horse* divides neatly into two parts that might be subtitled "Spar and Tell." The first act is a kind of sexual scrimmage with earthy roughhousing on Gert's part and some wild and woozy comic foolery on Harry's. The tone is that of a mating between Steinbeck and Saroyan.

Act II is an emotional landfall with the two characters no longer fencing defensively but confessing their past scars, present fears and future hopes. The reason this is so affecting lies in the consummate skill and total human-

ity with which Moore and Ferrell infuse their roles.

When Harry attempts to articulate a thought, he chokes on it like a fishbone. But he finally blurts out his heart's desire. He wants to marry Gert and have kids. This puts Gert into a sullen, belligerent funk. She laughs at Harry. He cannot bear to be laughed at. She cannot bear to be wanted, needed and loved. Brutalized in an early marriage, she has cultivated her fat as protective armor so as never to be wanted again. Though neither of them could begin to say it, they are spent with running from the vicious foxhounds of the world. They are both seeking the peace and safety that Blanche DuBois called "a cleft in the rock of the world," and at play's end they seem to have found it.

For the Circle Repertory Theater Co., *The Sea Horse* is the third small triumph in a row, following the still-running *When You Comin' Back Red Ryder?* and *The Hot I Baltimore*. In the past couple of seasons C.R.T.C. has become the most fecund off-off-Broadway group. Each of these productions made a successful transition to off-Broadway, a dramatic terrain that no longer bustles with the creative vitality it once had. The C.R.T.C. group is drawn to plays about people who have been badly bruised by life but are buoyed up by a resilient humor and a spunky refusal to admit defeat. In directing *The Sea Horse*, Marshall W. Mason is as true to that theme as a plumb line. ■ T.E. Kolem

Scene of the Crime

JACK RUBY, ALL-AMERICAN BOY
by JOHN LOGAN in association with
PAUL BAKER

Dallas was the scene of epic tragedy, but the city has never possessed much of a tragic sense. It has tended to regard itself, somewhat defensively, as a bystander at a drama enacted by outsiders. Still, even after more than ten years, there is a complicated fascination in watching the Dallas Theater Center's company replay the events of November 1963 before a Dallas audience.

Not that *Jack Ruby, All-American Boy* is anything like an indictment of Dallas. Or that John Logan's play deals with conspiracy theories or even with Lee Harvey Oswald. The assassin appears only as a menacing rifleman waiting behind a scrim, and then as a sweating prisoner led down the garage ramp to be shot himself. The focus of this elaborate and populous production is Jack Ruby, the bloody little Sunday morning angel of vengeance.

Logan, 34, an actor and playwright, based his drama on extensive research into Ruby's background. The play is a sort of hallucinatory documentary. It starts, unpromisingly, as a tourists' ex-

ursion through a Disneyland museum of the American dream, then settles into Jack Ruby's Carousel Club. Ruby, in his sharkskin suit, hawks strippers and gimmicks like a twister's exercise board. He is pathologically eager to please and to succeed, to manifest the American dream.

The play takes Ruby through the assassination weekend. He greets the killing with a mixture of maudlin sentimentality, explosive violence and foxy commercialism—should he close down the club for the weekend? The assassination of Oswald is treated as an intricate accident of circumstances and personality, history's shabby talent for placing the wrong man at the inexorably right place.

Actor Ken Latimer's Jack Ruby has a nice edge of brusque kindness and craziness, as well as both a vulnerability and homicidal toughness. All of those qualities are impacted against the dream that Ruby could not have: the Kennedys' grace of popular love and easy money. The play is too long and a bit diffuse. Managing Director Paul Baker has been ambitious in his effects: Kennedy motorcade films projected at either side of the stage, disembodied J.F.K. quotes, an unexplained girl (the American success?) dreamily stripping and wrapping herself in bunting on a ladder high above the action. But most of it works very effectively. Dallas audiences respond with standing ovations—which may reflect not only enthusiasm for the performance but also a civic relief, the comfort of the elapsed time between then and now. ■ Lance Morrow

LATIMER (ON RIGHT) IN JACK RUBY



ADY HANSON