

THE PROVIDENCE PHOENIX

Them Changes

Rose Weaver's Masterful *Menopause Mama*

BY JOHNETTE RODRIGUEZ

With scientific studies increasingly questioning the long-term, health-endangering effects of hormone therapy to counteract the symptoms of menopause and with the whole Boomer Generation moving through that time in their lives, Rose Weaver's one-woman show about women and aging, *Menopause Mama*, is even more relevant than when it first appeared in a workshop presentation at Perishable Theatre in the fall of 2002. It premiered in its full-length, 80-minute version in May 2003 at Perishable, and it is currently scheduled for an extended run at the Odeum in East Greenwich (summer weekends through August 22, with no shows July 2 through 4 and 9 through 11).



First conceived when Weaver was finishing up an MFA in playwriting at Brown University in 1998, *Mama* draws on the experiences of Weaver and her friends, on extensive research and on the responses Weaver received from audience members at early readings. The piece has evolved to include a scenic backdrop with abstract splashes of color (by Jeremy Woodward), a multi-purpose costume in pink and lavender, with various hats (by Marilyn Salvatore), nuanced choreography to accompany Weaver's songs (by Julie Strandberg) and evocative lighting (by Deb Sullivan). All of these contributions have buffed the show to a fine polish.

Director Bob Jaffe has guided Weaver's considerable energy as a performer and her enthusiasms as a playwright into a

medley of monologues and songs that moves fleetly from one to another without rushing sequences that need time to develop. Jaffe's skill has helped Weaver shape her ideas into characters and scenes that allow her acting and her comic talents to shine alongside her powerful singing.

Thus, though the issues of menopause — physical symptoms, mental and emotional changes, society's expectations of "older women" — are woven through the piece, they are made memorable through narrative rather than recitation. The through-line of *Menopause Mama* is a petition that Menopause Mama herself has decided to circulate, with five items detailing her concerns: that all female products be grouped and given their own sign in supermarkets and pharmacies; that young girls be taught to honor those things that make them female; that men acknowledge that they, too, go through a mid-life change; that mature women be featured on the outside and on the inside of fashion magazines; and that women not be called derogatory names.

Menopause Mama herself opens the show with an interpretation of "Miss Celie's Blues," the Quincy Jones tune written for *The Color Purple*. It's a call to arms, as Weaver sings about "sisters," to recognize women's strength and endurance, ending with the upbeat lines, "We've got plenty of time" and "We're gonna be just fine." That sets the tone for the show, an affirmation that middle-aged women are not "crazy bitches," neither the first nor the second of the words in that phrase, just because they might fan themselves with anything handy when a hot flash hits or flip out when they misplace their car keys.

Weaver's main character of Menopause Mama is feisty, assertive, confident, and funny. She believes in speaking out about menopause issues, not "suffering in silence," whether it's about chin hairs or chocolate, messy housekeeping or an over-active libido. The points on her petition lead in to other characters, such as the teenager with the denim cap, high-wedged sandals, and cell phone; Ma Wise, the older woman with her cane, granny glasses and rhythm egg; and even a male character who is questioning his own sex drive.

Weaver has toned the teenager down a notch so that your mind doesn't fixate on her accent and her slang but rather on her serious adolescent complaints: "Why do they call it a 'period'? It's not the end of anything!" and "My whole life is in 15-day fragments!" Menopause Mama herself runs through a litany of myths and old men's tales about menstruating women that are heavy on "the work of the devil," warning that a look from such a woman could take "the silver off your mirror."

As the teenager, Weaver has the swaying, sliding walk to a T — her eyes sparkle and her shoulders punctuate her words as much as her hands. And when she enters as the elderly woman leaning forward on a cane, her voice has a high-pitched quiver to it and her head and hands tremble just a bit, even though this woman has as much sass and sauciness as the teen.

The most poetic and poignant passage of the show is Weaver's portrayal of a woman with a bit of the islands on her tongue, as she explains what's been happening to her during "the change." She feels sad about growing old, about a lack of intimacy with her husband, about being forgetful, about crying so often. Weaver's eyes convey that sadness, along with an intense longing to accept what is going on with her body and with her husband's.

This scene is followed by a song, "The Blue Pill," about a man who says, "I feel like I wanna but I can't when I wanna." Once again, Weaver so thoroughly becomes the character with changes in voice, carriage, and gesture that she carries you with her. She's also engaging as an older woman who realizes she is pregnant and gradually reveals that she's in a lesbian relationship.

The longest sequence in *Menopause Mama* actually breaks the one-woman mold by having Mark Anthony Brown's voice as the other side of an Internet relationship. But Weaver's writing has so much humor and her character is so spot-on, as she sends off her messages and gets replies, that it works.

And so does the piece as a whole. Weaver has found her footing for this show, thoroughly binding together its many parts, moving seamlessly from one character to another and from one style of presentation to the next, be it rap or rant, song, or story. *Menopause Mama* is not just for menopausal women; it's for anyone who wants a better understanding (and a lot of laughs) about the changes that happen to women (and to men) as they grow older.

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