

*Quilters*  
Book: Barbara Damashek and Molly Newman  
Music and Lyrics: Barbara Damashek  
Direction: Penny Metropulos  
Denver Center Theatre Company  
Denver, Colorado  
July 12, 2009

A woman's voice, a woman's life -- such is the essence of "herstory." As a reclamation and retelling of history, herstory unearths a female narrative and restores a live portrait, engaging the long-absent voice of the female Other to rewrite historically male-dominated texts. And one of the most effective manifestations of the herstorical project is the theatrical performance. Thus, after 27 years, the return of *Quilters* to the Denver Center serves to remind audiences of the import and impact of "history-cum-herstory" on stage.

Since its Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) premiere in 1982, *Quilters* has become a staple for regional and community theatres throughout the United States. Given its nontraditional musical component (music/lyrics by Barbara Damashek) and nonlinear book (co-written by Damashek and Molly Newman), one must wonder at the popularity of this woman-centric ensemble piece. If the DCTC revival, directed by Penny Metropulos, is any indication, the secret to the work's longevity lies in its ability to poignantly speak to an audience via the personal, impressionist art that is created and communicated by its company of women. *Quilters* is a pointillist portrait. Seven cast members apply individual brushstrokes, dotting the canvas with stories and song to craft a collective, cohesive matriarchal rendering of 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneer life. Specifically, *Quilters'* libretto is a fluid, shared monology by actors who play a multitude of characters. Musically, the "patchwork" score is comprised of folk interpolations alongside original compositions, together reflecting the sound of America's heartland. At the Denver Center, music director Sterling Tinsley expanded and embellished the chamber score, reorchestrating the work for a six-piece ensemble, with instrumentation ranging from violin to hammered dulcimer. Contributing to the pointillist aesthetic,

William Bloodgood's minimalist scene design and Don Damutzer's lighting created an impressionistic "prairie," consisting of dappled greens projected onto a raked thrust stage. Basic set pieces (rocking chair, windmill) were intermittently added to this open space, while an upstage cyclorama was saturated with color and projections, rendering vistas of clear skies, impending storms, and raging fires. Underscoring this mélange of light and color were sound designer Craig Breitenbach's acoustic suggestions of nature.

*Quilters*, however, is ultimately a canvas of women. And the "pointillist" metaphor finds its most potent stage representation in the form of the quilt -- that uniquely American symbol of female communication, community, commerce, craft/art, and continuity. When Sarah, the matriarch at the center (and heart) of the production, proclaims that she is creating a "legacy quilt" to pass to her daughters, she becomes the vehicle through which the pointillist painting/quilt finds life. Played by longtime DCTC favorite, Kathleen M. Brady, Sarah is alternately brusque, sturdy, sentimental, and humorous as she struggles to find her voice and create a narrative through "the fruit of her hands." Redolent of Sarah's piecework (bright, colorful patterns offset by accompanying "shadow" blocks), Brady's performance projected both pathos and pragmatic positivism, grounding the entire production with her stoic, yet sensitive, portrayal of the enduring matriarch. Breathing life into all the women contained in Sarah's narrative were ensemble members Victoria Adams-Zischke, Susannah Flood, Kara Lindsay, Christine Rowan, and Linda Mugleston. Significantly, as *Quilters'* women navigate adolescence, marriage, motherhood, nature, sickness, and death, they look to the quilt as diary, discourse, and deliverance. And during such moments, the DCTC ensemble imbued their portrayals with depth and complexity. Especially notable was Flood as the young subversive Lizzie, whose squirming energy could not be contained as she proclaimed herself to be her "father's girl" and vowed to "never have nothin' to do" with quilting. It was a comic, antic performance which informed, poignantly, Flood's later portrayal of Lizzie as an adult spinster who stoically

recounts her barren condition and her resultant abandonment by a fiancée. Indeed, childbearing is a reoccurring theme and touchstone in *Quilters*. As a 35-year-old woman pregnant with her 15<sup>th</sup> child and pursuing an abortion (the “recipe”), Rowan found a beautiful balance between panic and pained resignation. And as a young mental ward patient diagnosed with “having had too many too fast,” Lindsay provided glimpses of fragmented passion; while Mugleston underscored the scene with the song “Butterfly” -- her vocal melisma beautifully suggesting the flight, flutter, and fragility of the metaphoric insect. Concurrently, throughout the production, all the women sang the melodic, contrapuntal, and complex score simply, directly, and beautifully.

Unfortunately, however, the DCTC revival imposed another voice upon this pointillist tapestry, undermining the inherent strength and significance of the herstorical content/intent of *Quilters*. Although men are ever-present as peripheral characters in the libretto, they are traditionally “fleshed out” by the female actors who performatively assume the roles on stage. Such a practice represents a “performance of gender,” signifying a subversion, transgression, and negation of traditionally male-imposed gender strictures for women. With Metropulos’ addition of a male actor (Jeff Skowron), however, this aspect of *Quilters* was seriously compromised. Instead of creating a liminal female world on stage, Metropulos somewhat reinscribed gender roles and interrupted the fluidity inherent in the book by introducing concrete (and, somewhat, “token”) corporeality. While Skowron did a competent job in his portrayals of the male characters, his presence often seemed unnecessarily intrusive. For instance, in “The Needle’s Eye,” the women individually recite past letters to Sarah’s son, portraying him through a female lens. However, as Metropulos placed Skowron upstage of the women, reacting to the letters, the women’s viewpoint became muddled as his awkward exhibition pulled focus, diluting (and, occasionally, dominating) their monologues. Further, the male voice weakened *Quilters* musically, as the lone timbre/tone often interloped and interrupted the women’s chorus, standing apart and, accordingly, convoluting the women’s attempt

to create a merged madrigal of female meaning. In short, when Sarah's finished quilt was triumphantly lowered onto the DCTC stage at the musical's end, "her story" was complete. Yet, "herstory" was curiously unrealized in this otherwise masterful production, as the stage's liminality was negated by a conceptual reinscription of gender and male-authored history.