

Barbies dance in Jane Comfort's thought-provoking 'Beauty'



By: **ROBERT JOHNSON** | February 9, 2016

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Dancers portray Barbie dolls in "Beauty," which was presented at The Theatre at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg, Friday.

Barbie made the cover of "Time" magazine this month, when her parent company, Mattel, announced plans to manufacture the girls doll in shapes and sizes that more accurately represent women's bodies. This corrective came too late to save Barbie from the satirical wrath of choreographer Jane Comfort, however.

The dancers of Jane Comfort and Company, who turned up on Friday in The Theatre at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg, have been

touring since 2012 with a darkly comic performance piece called "Beauty," in which Barbie stands for all that's wrong with society's expectations of women. If the old, unreformed Barbie were a living person, a pundit recently estimated, her measurements would be 39-18-33, implying that even if she were able to stand without toppling forward she would still be too starved to menstruate. As a role model for girls, Barbie is problematic.

The protagonist of "Beauty," a woman primping before she goes on a date, may not have Barbie on her mind. Yet for some reason it takes this character, played by Hannah Heller, an awfully long time to get ready. It takes her so long, in fact, that an audience can sit back and watch a whole variety show that begins and ends with a glittery swimsuit contest in which four other women impersonate Barbie — one arm swinging up from the shoulder to wave "hello," barefoot but perched on tip-toe in a pose that requires high-heels, and with enhanced breasts protruding. Though they must be uncomfortable, these human Barbies smile graciously.

Answering the questions directed to them, one says, "My biggest dream has always been that Ken would walk through that door and ask me on a date." The line cues Sean Donovan, the only man in this ensemble, to make a cheerful entrance. Barbie's dream date may not be all she longs for, however. The dolls' stiff embrace looks awkward; and when Ken lowers himself on top of Barbie, the soundtrack records girlish giggles but no yelps of passion. "Uh, bye!" she tells Ken when their tepid encounter ends. It's hard to imagine either of these plastic toys experiencing sexual fulfillment.

Abandoning the competition format, Comfort shows us a world obsessed with artificial glamour that everyone will recognize but most people give scant thought to. “I am beautiful!” Petra Van Noort insists, embracing a positive attitude. “I radiate happiness!” Yet she admits to graying hair, cellulite and crooked teeth before the women throw themselves into a desperate, aerobics routine; and one of them surreptitiously eats the corner of a tissue.

In another skit, Donovan returns as “Dave,” a blogger who shares pick-up tips with other men, teaching them to recognize the signs a woman is approachable. Decoding women’s body language leads naturally to a scene in which Ellen Smith Ahern tries out different poses while voices (in her head?) pass judgment. A powerless stance, with her body twisted and head tilted to the side, wins laughter and cooing approval. Raising her fist in anger, however, makes the voices sputter and fume. With tacit coaching from these internalized experts, it doesn’t take long for Ahern to adopt a passive and hyper-sexualized persona.

If that doesn’t work, of course, there’s always plastic surgery. Perhaps the most disturbing skit of the evening shows Donovan as the medical specialist eager to accommodate Lucie Baker’s desire for a narrower figure, using a marker to outline the parts of her body that he will trim away. They also exchange smiles, and it is horrifying to watch Baker collude in her own butchery. From the surgical suite we move to the catwalk, where Van Noort receives instruction in how to sashay like a beauty pageant queen. After she wins her crown, Donovan assures her, she can use these skills in the boardroom. Gyrating in lacy, black undergarments, Leslie Cuyjet poses saucily for a photographer. Before the resulting images can pass muster, however, they must be photo-shopped; and we learn how advertising lies to us when we see Cuyjet’s picture projected on a screen where it is sculpted, lengthened and whitened.

Meanwhile, Heller is still getting ready for her date: blowdrying her hair; shaving her legs; curling her eye-lashes; squeezing into a girdle and jiggling her falsies; applying make-up and hairspray. Talk about a performance! As an afterthought, she pops a cotton ball soaked in orange juice into her mouth so she can tell her boyfriend she already dined.

Comfort isn’t done with us, though. At the end of the evening, the four Barbies return and it will be up to the audience to decide which of these ladies is most beautiful. Although we’re stuck with a guilt trip, the competition’s losers seem to be the lucky ones. Hastening to ditch their spangled swimwear in favor of loose clothes, they scuttle out of the theater while the two winners (it’s a tietonight) are loaded down with regalia.

“Beauty” is mind-bending, and like Comfort’s aspiring beauty queen, viewers may need to take a “big, juicy breath” before we can lift our heads again and vogue to the parking lot.