

Nina Arsenault in the intense and confessional *The Silicone Diaries*.

ABOUT A BOY WHO BECAME A WOMAN

THEATRE REVIEW

The Silicone Diaries
Buddies in Bad Times
Theatre, Toronto

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN

I've never seen as many people leave the theatre during a performance as I did at the re-opening of *The Silicone Diaries*. (The show, a hit in Buddies in Bad Times' cabaret room last season, is back for a run in the main space.) Their discomfort was, I'm fairly sure, physical rather than aesthetic, since the performance itself is a remarkable one. It's a transsexual's detailed account of her journey from a male body to a female one, and it includes extensive film footage of plastic surgery, both bodily and facial, as well as extensive verbal descriptions. The protagonist's trajectory was, in a sense, reversed by those in the audience who took early retirement: in the show's first half, the evacuees were women, in the second, as the story threatened to cut closer to home, so to speak, they were men.

Nina Arsenault, who lived the story and is now telling it, was very understanding. "It's intense," she said sympathetically, in the wake of one especially distressed patron who was actually throwing up as she exited. I confess to averting my own eyes from some of the procedures on the screen. The procedure on the stage is another matter. This is a show about self-fashioning that's also an example of it.

Over the years, Arsenault has turned herself not only into a woman but into a very accomplished performer. With sympathetic direction by Brendan Healy, she plays with great physical grace, never more so than in a late and very amusing section when, delicate feet furiously turning, she mimes her progress on an exercise bike. Her petite pedal extremities (thank you, Fats Waller) round off a tall body, sheathed in a strapless, see-through dress, possibly made out of latex. Vocally, she has only one tone

but great command of phrasing. She has written herself some long twisting sentences, which she navigates with extreme elegance and unflinching wit.

First she takes us back to the formative experience of her life when, as a five-year-old boy from an Ontario trailer park, she was entranced by the sight of a mannequin in a chain store. (This may be the only time, in art or in life, in which the words "a Zellers employee" have been uttered in tones of rapt enchantment.) Her life becomes a quest to look, to be, that beautiful, that immune. With a brain that gets her through college and into a teaching assistantship, she moonlights in a porn parlour, still physically a man but communicating online as a woman; so she did have early

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practice as a performer, if of a rather specialized kind. She's very good at it; a couple of grateful long-distance clients stake her to her first trip to the U.S., for the first of many, many additions and subtractions. She becomes a passive virtuoso of the operating table, and she meets others similarly dedicated, including one who eventually becomes a cosmetic martyr.

The show's serio-comic highlight is Arsenault's account of an evening at a Toronto nightclub where she sets her sights on Tommy Lee. As a six-foot expansively (not to say expansively) sculpted blond, she naturally attracts his attention. And he compels hers, not just by being a rock star trailing hundreds of reputed conquests, but as the ex-husband of Pamela Anderson, who seems to be Arsenault's role model; though of course Anderson started off with more advantages, or at least fewer handicaps. It all goes

very well until Lee's entourage clue him in that all is not quite what it seems, though both parties manage to retire with their dignities at least outwardly intact.

Arsenault's Pamela Anderson project, though, raises questions, with which the play's last scene attempts, not altogether successfully, to grapple. On the one hand, we seem meant to admire her as someone who has, to an extraordinary degree, taken control of her own destiny. On the other, we're always being told how pernicious it is that women should be pressured to buy into a commercial ideal of beauty, and this seems to be what Arsenault has done, in spades; the fact that she started on the other side of the fence gets her all kinds of added marks for effort but doesn't really alter the equation. In fact it illustrates it, in starkest relief. So it's unclear whether it's tragic or ironic that Arsenault, who's treated her body as an ongoing work of art, should turn out, inevitably, to have been working in a perishable medium.

There's a stunning moment at which she takes off her wig and turns out to have realized her ambition; she looks, in that second, as much like a mannequin as anyone ever could. But of course she also wants to be a person, and still wants to be a beautiful one, though she starts talking about inner beauty and takes more conventional steps (thus, the exercise bike) to preserve the outer kind. Well, we all grow old, and the air of special pleading, not to say self-pity, that overtakes the play at the end doesn't feel earned. The applause, however, does. The production has stylish visuals, designed by Trevor Schweltnus, and sound by the ubiquitous Richard Feren, which, if anyone else had done it, would be exceptional.

■ *The Silicone Diaries* runs until Dec. 11. For tickets, call 416-975-8555 or visit totix.ca.

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will return