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Welcome to My Rash / Third

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A rash that forms a question mark between a middle-aged woman's legs? In a play that may have overtones of an autobiographical relationship to its playwright, that may be just a bit too much information. However, when the playwright in question (so to speak), is Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winner Wendy Wasserstein, one has to wonder if the dermatological punctuation mark signals a new dimension in her generation-defining explorations into the lives of contemporary women.

Wasserstein's new piece consists of two companion one-acts, called *Welcome To My Rash and Third*. The first new stage works from the playwright in several years, the plays are described as "chamber works" by Ari Roth, artistic director of Washington's Theater J, which is presenting their world premiere. *Rash* is uneven, a mixture of brilliant dialogue and muddled message, while *Third* is stylishly written, thought provoking, and iconoclastic --

or, to put it another way, it's what we like to think of as a Wendy Wasserstein play.

The production is in good hands, carefully directed by Wasserstein's friend Michael Barakiva. Both plays feature Obie Award winner Kathryn Grody in thoroughly compelling performances, backed by a small and quite capable cast. Grody's work in *Welcome To My Rash* helps gloss over some of the play's weaknesses, while both actor and script are rapier-sharp in *Third*.

In *Rash*, Grody is Flora Berman, a writer dealing with a variety of odd medical afflictions. With her frizzy hair unkempt and dressed in nondescript, shapeless clothing, she's in an early stage of leukemia; her upper lip is paralyzed, an eye provides her with kaleidoscope-style vision, and she has difficulty walking. Then there's that odd rash, which had first manifested itself two decades previously and makes a return appearance here, diagnosed as a result of her body being allergic to its own hormonal cycle. Flora wryly refers to this news by describing the inflammation as "re-defined female self-loathing."

As she undergoes a series of medical treatments and simultaneously writes a screenplay -- echoes of a recent chapter in Wasserstein's life -- Flora grudgingly forms a friendship with the eccentric doctor Kipling Varajan (Bill Grimmette), a caricature of the modern physician-as-self-promoter who

cheerfully swoops in on her between stops on an international schedule of high-profile medical conferences. He's a literate man, familiar with Flora's feminist writing, and their conversation ranges from the existential to the banal. Varajan also appears as a mystical rabbi in Flora's drug-induced hallucinations, dream-like sequences that include a parable concerning Cupid (Edward Boroevich) and his love interest, Psyche (Janine Barris). The Greek mythology is presented in counterpoint to Flora's life as she faces her mortality, but the Gods are as unfocused as she is; the message gets lost in a torrent of pop culture references from Tovah Feldshuh to *American Idol* and snatches of Top-40 tunes from the 1960s. By play's end, Flora finds a new way of looking at her life.

The energy level is much higher and the focus much sharper in *Third*. Grody makes a stark transformation from a dowdy, uncertain writer to a supremely confident and dogmatic college literature professor. Laurie Jameson, an old friend of writer Flora, holds forth in a private liberal arts college. Her take on *King Lear* is that the real story is the "girlification" of Cordelia, rather than Lear's tragedy. Cordelia, she states, is but a "narcissistic simp," while the "real heroes" of the story are the scheming daughters Goneril and Regan. Thus, she puts a proto-feminist stamp on the story while simultaneously indicting most contemporary scholars as male chauvinists.

It's an argument that Professor Jameson makes rationally, even if her strident certainty is inadvertently comical. When a male student -- a jock and a potential conservative on a campus held in an iron grip of political and cultural correctness -- offers a different interpretation of the Shakespeare opus, Jameson accuses him of plagiarizing. She's unable to accept that a student she has pigeonholed as a non-intellectual because of his socio-economic background, athletic ability, and what she perceives as his politics could have formulated such a cogent and original set of arguments.

Edward Boroevich is Woodson Bull, III -- or "Third," as he prefers to be called. Boroevich deftly utilizes a natural vocal style that enhances his depiction of an open-faced and seemingly guileless young man. Third may be all that Jameson thinks he is but, as fleshed out by Boroevich, he is much more. Jameson, meanwhile, is dealing with hot flashes and fantasizes about removing her shirt, going as

far as telling Third that she'd rather call him "Woody" and muttering in an aside that the word has a special attraction for her at the moment. The two clash over culture and politics until it becomes apparent that Jameson may be suffocating in an intellectual straitjacket of her own making, while the supposedly anti-intellectual jock is really the one with the open mind. As they deconstruct Shakespeare's work, they also deconstruct current political stereotypes, and Wasserstein challenges ideas that may be held dear by some of her most fervent fans.

A subplot involving Jameson's rebellious, college-age daughter Emily (Janine Barris) also puts a few cracks in the professor's view of herself and her world, leading her to make a reality check; thus, the two plays complement each other. *Rash* concerns an uncertain woman who finds a new lease on life and faces the future with renewed confidence; *Third* reverses that construct. In essence, Wasserstein presents two very different

women who make a similar journey of discovery but end up going in opposite directions. *Rash* needs more focus but the raw material is certainly there for a penetrating look at a woman dealing with mid-life; *Third*, on the other hand, is just about perfect. Ironically, *Third* was created as something of an afterthought during workshops for *Rash* when Theater J. asked the playwright what else she might be able to give them. Cuffed about by New York-based critics for her last few plays, Wasserstein deliberately chose a low-key, somewhat off the main track debut for this latest work. (Theater J is a professional theater company sponsored by the Washington, D.C. Jewish Community Center.) She has, however, let the producers at Lincoln Center Theater have a look at the plays, and it's possible that they will be performed there next season.