

'Miss Margarida' triumphs

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Review

Miss Margarida's way is the only way to go. No wonder Estelle Parsons as the frenzied eighth grade schoolteacher in "Miss Margarida's Way" reminds the audience several times, "Everybody wants to be Miss Margarida!"

Except for the couple sitting just ahead of me, who walked out early in the first act, the audience opening night at the Birmingham Theatre eagerly shared the experiences Miss Margarida taught. The show continues through Sunday.

It has a perverse theme, about how we are intimidated by powers of various kinds (from cradle to grave, from religious to sexual). And Miss Margarida as a schoolteacher is the perfect symbol of authority.

THE HOUSELIGHTS never go down, and the theatergoers' frequent laughter alternates with hushed moments when Miss Margarida teaches, taunts and terrifies.

Estelle Parsons, the Academy-Award winning actress, wrings every ounce of hilarity from the role. Miss Margarida is slightly mad, a perfect fright to look at most of the time, sexually enticing.

In this unusual vehicle, written and directed by Brazilian playwright Roberto Alfaro, she gives a performance that is overwhelming in its complexity.

Throughout the play, the audience is the eighth grade class of students, and only one ringer in the class joins Miss Margarida on stage several times.

Miss Margarida enjoins her students to come to her desk or the blackboard, but perils awaits those who dare. The

young man, Fred Stragatz, is the silent majority who sometimes comes before Miss Margarida without being called forth, either.

Like all dictators, Miss Margarida demands total obedience and she makes the rules. In her crazy classroom, where textbooks pour from a small table's single drawer, she teaches a variety of subjects, all urgently.

AT FIRST her handwriting on the blackboard is most distinct, as Miss Margarida gets the audience's attention with an impolite word she writes.

During the rest of the play she scrawls on the blackboard in bizarre, nightmarish handwriting as she lectures. Colored chalks emphasize the different needs of men, who together beg for help in the melting pot of humanity.

Miss Margarida teaches biology primarily, the science of life, and her lessons taught frenziedly are to prepare her students for life. These lessons are absurd but also real, smacking you to attention with macabre humor when she emphasizes three important stages of life. She tells you bluntly that you are going to die, and it comes out very bold and funny.

Anyone in the audience can participate in the show, if they wish. Miss Margarida knows how to handle them, demanding later-comers come on stage to the head of the class and explain themselves. Those who walked out were apparently "in the wrong class," she calls out.

The language used by Miss Margarida is rough, spilling over with four-letter words as she bares her venom. The animosity she feels toward her students comes out in her inventive, designed to repel them, but she also soothes them. "Miss Margarida loves you!"

MISS MARGARIDA teaches arithmetic and how to divide, by explaining everybody wants more than the others. The lessons come fast, and Miss Margarida never lets up, though she flaunts the students' fascination with wanting to learn about sex and her body.

She warns she will never teach them that, but her own desires continually twist and turn during the class period.

Estelle Parsons as Miss Margarida literally lets down her hair, brushes it on stage, at one time applies make-up grotesquely at her desk, gives the audience a peek at her panties, tears

off the top of her dress and marches around in her slip.

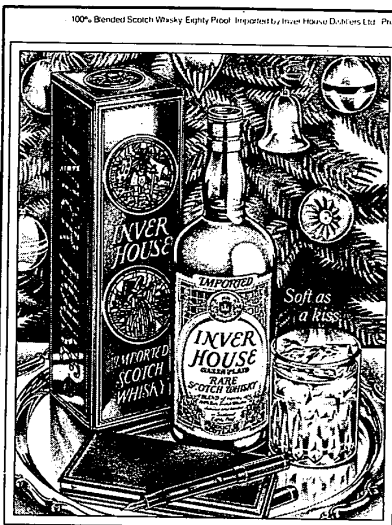
She spouts dialogue that has passages that would seem to defy memorization, yet she wheels along building to a fever pitch, reciting active verbs.

The most incredible part of this whole performance is that her actions are timed to the nuance, teetering on the brink, and you may find yourself constantly laughing. I did.

It is a grim subject treated satirically. Ms. Parsons' voice knows when to squeal or lash out, when to pause, and you're riding her rollercoaster.

AFTER THE performance, Ms. Parsons came out, as herself, and invited the audience to stay and ask questions about the theatrical piece.

She explained some of its history, talked about it as an intellectual game. Throughout the piece, she was constantly reminded of the Jonestown affair, Ms. Parsons said.



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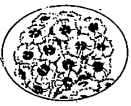
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