

BERKELEY VOICE

The
Voice **ARTS**

A potent one-woman satire on Miss America

By Kay Sundstrom

The Voice

Supposedly, all little girls want to be princesses, ballerinas, or Miss Americas wearing rhinestone tiaras when they grow up. And all little girls know that if they are good, sweet and pretty, there's no way things can turn out otherwise.

But after Miss America takes off her tiara and starts smearing

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cold cream on her face to prevent wrinkles under her eyes, what happens? The tales tell us that she lives happily ever after. But in *Miss America's Daughters*, Tanya Shaffer offers a different answer.

Miss America's Daughters, a one-woman show created and performed by Shaffer, blends music, dance and acting to expose flaws and hypocrisy in the sweet-little-girl scenario. This satirical piece focuses on two characters, an aging Miss America and her rebellious, scornful daughter who feels that embarrassing her mother is part of her job.

Besides these two characters, Shaffer also plays a woman in a self-defense class, a baby in the womb, an old fat woman, and a narrator who ties all the pieces together.

Shaffer's satire is bitter, accurate and often funny. Her Miss America is intent on molding her daughter into an ideal of womanly grace — a carbon copy of herself — and calls her "my living doll."

Her "lessons" reveal the ludicrousness of the beauty queen ideal. But what makes the satire poignant is that Miss America, a desperate and lonely woman, still believes in the concept of happily-ever-after. She has nothing else.

Shaffer does not portray her as



Learn how to twinkle:
Tanya Shaffer as Miss America's daughter

an airhead; rather, the woman behind the beauty queen is strong and intelligent, and plays the shallow, vapid girl only because that is how the game must be played. You must glide in babysteps, she tells her daughter; you must learn how to twinkle; beauty contest winners have hourglass figures and three minutes' worth of talent.

But Miss America's daughter is an "ugly duckling" who neither wants stardom nor believes in it. Her mother's lessons never mention rape, bulimia, rejection, despair or old age. As the daughter puts it, Miss America never gets jumped in a back alley.

One of the most powerful moments in the play is when Miss America's daughter confesses to bulimia, to "toilet bowls," and "magic capsules." Standing in front of the mirror, she calls herself a blimp and a cow, and then starts beating herself in a litany of self-hate.

Another notable moment is when one of Shaffer's characters, a woman who has taken a self-defense class, confesses that she understands why a man commits rape. By hurting someone else, you lesson your own vulnerability, she explains, by attaining

power over the opposite, the unknown.

In no way does Shaffer condone rape, but here she reveals that rape is not simply the twisting of a few sick minds, but rather the symptom of a society divided into those who have power and those who do not.

At the end, Shaffer does offer redemption. An old, fat woman talks about how she learned to love herself, how her weight has finally given her power and presence in a world that wants only to diminish her.

Shaffer has a beautiful singing voice, a strong stage presence, and she moves well. As Miss America, she often poses with the exaggerated grace of a 1940s silver screen actress; as Miss America's daughter she has the coltish self-consciousness of a teenager.

The piece could use some editing. Even though the language is often incisive and potent, there are times when it is overburdened with poetic imagery. Often this verbal lushness reflects the absurdity of Miss America's beliefs; but at other times, a strong phrase or disclosure is muffled and weakened by excess wordplay.

The boundaries between characters are often blurred, and the play has a dreamlike quality. But at times I didn't know if a character was a person in her own right or another aspect of Miss America or her daughter. Perhaps this was intentional. The play remains a thoughtful, complex, and powerful piece of theatre.

Miss America's Daughters plays Sunday, Feb. 5 at 8 p.m. at Ashkenaz, 1317 San Pablo. Tickets are \$5. More more information call 525-5054.

The play will also run in San Francisco on Feb. 17th at Artemis Cafe, 1199 Valencia. For more information call 821-1232.