

Entertainment

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Ride the 'mama coaster' with 'The Passion of the Hausfrau'

By DEBRA BANERJEE

An ordinary woman's adventures in Mommywood are the stuff that myths are made of, according to Nicole Chaison's book and now new play, "The Passion of the Hausfrau." In the "momedry" genre, written by and for smart, accomplished women who juggle work and family or who give up a career to raise a family, struggling to maintain a sense of self is a recurring theme.

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Chaison, a housewife/writer from Portland, Maine, adds a quirky, literary twist to the genre by structuring her piece using Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," the 1949 work of comparative mythology, which codified the journey of a classic hero. The middle-aged woman of the play riding the wild "mama coaster" discovers that parenting in itself is a heroic act. In the "zen" of being a hausfrau she finally finds her passion, her creativity and realizes her destiny.

The New York premiere of "The Passion of the Housewife" takes place at the White Plains Performing Arts Center in White

Plains through Feb. 13.

"The Passion of the Hausfrau," published as a "graphic memoir" by Random House in 2009, began as Chaison's "Hausfrau Muthah-zine" an online publication "for gals with kids." The one-woman play, adapted from Chaison's stories by Chaison, performer Bess Welden and Annette Jolles, artistic director of WPPAC, who also directed this production, incorporates Chaison's charming, comic-book style drawings which are projected on a screen to illustrate the story.

Welden gives a sturdy performance as the hausfrau and all the characters who fill her life: husband, son, daughter, mother, grandmother, friends. She easily inhabits each persona with a deft change of stance, a voice, a gesture. I particularly enjoyed her character "Grandma Millie" who speaks to the hausfrau from the great beyond — up or down — we're never sure.

Hausfrau talks about the "land B.C." — before children and the "land A.D." — after dilation. She talks about the excitement of landing a job writing a catalogue for a museum exhibit only to have her time and interest evaporate when she becomes a mother. She laments that an undeserving high school

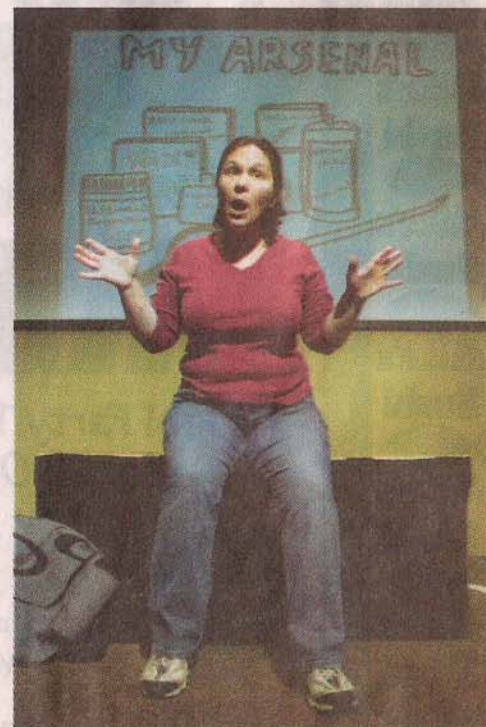
friend has come out with a book and found fame. She feels hurt that her own mother denigrates her hausfrau status.

"The Passion of the Hausfrau" is more than just a cutesy sketch piece. It is thoughtful, creative and intelligent — just like the hausfrau herself. Dads will enjoy the play too, identifying with the family situations, gender expectations and the cultural touchstones.

A few pop cultural references could date this show quickly and impact its relevance. The mention of Sean Penn and the movie "Mystic River" as a topical event? That's so 2003!

The illustrations definitely energized this production, breaking up and enhancing the narrative. A few times I didn't understand what the hausfrau was talking about, particularly in reference to Campbell's work, until I saw the illustration.

"The Passion of the Hausfrau" completes its short run at WPPAC this weekend. Remaining performances are Friday, Feb. 11, at 8 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 12, at 8 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 13, at 2 p.m. For tickets, see www.wppac.com.



Bess Welden