

## THEATER

# 'Heidi' underscores flaws in script, feminists' crusade

By Porter Anderson

**T**HEATRE THREE was rightly proud to achieve the rights to stage Wendy Wasserstein's "The Heidi Chronicles." Theatre Three is a leading Equity house and owes Dallas-Fort Worth contemporary works of impact on the American theater scene.

Sometimes, though, this means you'll see less than the best. Compared to "Heidi," the Dallas Theater Center's "The Substance of Fire" is by far the more sophisticated show. "Heidi" is a much-acclaimed passel of flaws.

An additional plus here is Cheryl Denson's direction. Denson's instincts are sure. She now can concentrate on restraint. In "Heidi," she heaves subtleties at us. In the 3-hour show's prologue, Denson has actress Cheryl Norris as art-historian Heidi lecture in such evangelical fervor that the show could be stopped for a National Organization of Women collection before proceeding to Scene 1.

What director Denson does provide as clearly as a good museum exhibit — and neatly poised as such on designer Wade J. Giampa's gallery-neutral set — is a look at how awkward Wasserstein's script is.

These "Chronicles" trace Heidi's search for selfhood from 1965 to 1989. The show speaks of how women have been "stranded" by the feminist movement.

But Wasserstein satirizes and discredits the feminists throughout her 24-year tour of their movement. Often with rich humor, she makes them prey to men's come-ons at political events; gabbling gossipers at baby showers; and, in the controversial conclusion, people who

flee to tradition in the end. Wasserstein reveals women to be their worst enemies — and men a mean second, to be sure.

But she also makes it impossible for the intelligent Heidi to expect better. So of course the movement — like the show — fails.

Denson and technical director Tristan Wilson use projections and music to cover scene jumps, as director Dan Sullivan did on Broadway.

But this cast is uneven, dull by comparison to the show's mighty, united front of hairstyles by Russell Latham. These wigs could stage "Heidi" by themselves and march on Washington in the afternoon.

Johna Sprizzo is the most versatile actress here, as a militant lesbian, a society activist and a Southern newlywed. Norris, as Heidi, has a harder, reactive task and retreats too deeply into enervating introversion.

Jim Jorgensen and Scott Everhart, as two men in Heidi's life, progressively blur their characters all evening.

But Theatre Three succeeds in giving you a "Heidi" to debate, an evening worth discussing. And that, in this land of so much entertainment theater, is a gift.

*Porter Anderson is the Times Herald's theater and dance critic.*

## The Heidi Chronicles

Heidi: Cheryl Norris

Fran, Debby, Lisa: Johna Sprizzo

At Theatre Three, the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh, through Dec. 1; \$12.50-\$25; For times and ticket information, call 871-3300.