

Reviews/Theater

Woman's Many Lives In 'El Eterno Femenino'

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

Rosario Castellanos took the title of her play "El Eterno Femenino" from Goethe, but nothing else. "The eternal feminine leads us on," the German poet says at the end of "Faust." To the Mexican novelist and poet, this famous tag line was obviously something of a joke, perhaps a bitter one, and her dark comedy supplies a feminist corrective to women's history. But her vision of women's fate might make some feminists uncomfortable.

"El Eterno Femenino" has seldom been produced, even in Mexico. The manuscript dates from 1973, the year before Castellanos died. (She stepped out of a bathtub in Tel Aviv, where she was the Mexican Ambassador to Israel, touched a lamp switch and was electrocuted.) Since it was never staged in her lifetime and thus subjected to revision, it should be considered unfinished.

Nonetheless, it has great energy and humor — qualities exploited vigorously in the new production of the work by Repertorio Español under the direction of Beatriz Cordoba. Castellanos herself said it would be a good idea to pay more attention to situation and the rhythm of the plot than to individual characters, and Ms. Cordoba has taken the advice to heart. There may be no other sane approach for a play with 30, 31 or 32 roles (depending on how the director interprets several of them) taken here by 11 actors. (Castellanos defined the cast as "whoever appears.") Six of them play the heroine, Lupita, at 12 different stages of life.

At first glance the story is hardly promising. Lupita, preparing for her wedding, goes to a beauty parlor where a wily salesman has persuaded the owner to try out a dream device attached to the hair dryer. The dream it produces for Lupita is a nightmare of a woman's life in a macho world, from honeymoon to fragile old age.

In the second act she tries on a series of wigs that inspire daydreams of alternative versions of her life. Among other things, she is a ridiculous mistress, a hilariously inept reporter and a triumphant prostitute, and she ends up as Eve in Paradise where the playwright stands the biblical story of the first humans on its head. The Paradise scene best dis-

Dreams and Nightmares

EL ETERNO FEMENINO, by Rosario Castellanos; directed by Beatriz Cordoba; assistant director, Aitzpea Goenaga; mime, Michael Trautman; hair stylist, Ana Rojas; production assistants, Rigoberto Obando and Manuel Herrera; production design, Robert Weber Federico. Presented by Repertorio Español, Gilberto Zaldivar, producer; René Buch, artistic director. At the Gramercy Arts Theater, 138 East 27th Street.

WITH: Maria José Alvarez, Birgit Bofarull, Ofelia González, Katerina Lladó, Feiga Martínez, Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado, Carlos Osorio, Virginia Rambal, Diego Taborda, Tatiana Vecinos and David Zúñiga.

plays the quick turns of Castellanos's caustic wit and her scorn not only for machismo but also for compliant women, even for hesitant feminists.

Ms. Cordoba treats the story as just as unimportant as Castellanos thought it was, and she plays the farcical situations for all they are worth, sometimes more. She is a very successful extortionist of (occasionally nervous) laughter. The script is full of references to Mexican myths about women, history and especially to themes (and sometimes lines) of the great 17th-century Mexican poet Sor Juana, a nun who was nothing if not a precursor of modern feminism. For people who can catch these echos, they are there, but Ms. Cordoba wisely does not emphasize them for her North American audience.

In one respect her energy is annoying. In any production the play would not run more than two hours, but this director has shortened it considerably — not so much by cutting as by having the actors rap out lines so fast that some of them must be unintelligible even to people with a perfect ear for Spanish.

As usual, the members of this lively company perform with superb discipline and a kind of courtesy that sets them apart; their rule seems to be that the only mortal sin in theater is upstaging someone. It is a pleasure to watch them zip in and out of different characters in "El Eterno Femenino," and it is a mark of their achievement that the many different Lupitas add up to a single personality. It is beyond anyone to turn this work into a well-made play, but at least they make it all stick together.