

# Life of Leigh

## Vivid 'Vivien' at the Magic

by Richard Dodds

Vivien Leigh packed a lot of life into her mere 53 years, and *Vivien* packs a lot of that life into its mere 85 minutes. This solo drama, now at the Magic Theatre, is a superior example of the kind of theatrical vehicle that too often gets stuck in the shallows.

*Vivien: The Triumph and Madness of Vivien Leigh*, to give its full title, creates a surprisingly complex portrait of the talented but troubled actress, often finding commentary in her plights from the roles she famously played. Credit for the success of this enterprise deserves to be shared by playwright Rick Foster, actress Janis Stevens, and director Barbara Bosch.

Foster has set his play in 1967, in the moments before Leigh's death from complications of tuberculosis. In a fevered dream, she imagines she is at the London theater where she is to begin rehearsals for Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. She can't get a handle on her role; a character who claims to welcome madness, finding this to be a notion that could

only be held by someone who has never crossed over to the dark side.

As her reveries unfold, imagining she is being visited by Noel Coward and John Gielgud, she recalls key moments of her life and career. Laurence Olivier is very often at the center of them, as professional jealousies take as much of a toll as their mutual infidelities on their marriage.

Rather than simply having Vivien recite excerpts from her various roles, Foster has her take her various characters' words and turn them into weapons with which to battle life's indignities. These moments find a dual emotional context for these roles, and also offer the chance to provide some backstage gossip.

Director Barbara Bosch's production is filled with imaginative touches that use the casual scenery and props of a rehearsal stage to create evocations of costumes and even of mental disorder.

In her 85 minutes on the stage, Stevens manages at least as many emotional epiphanies, as she takes us through guises that range from coquette to happy homemaker to manic-depressive. She



John Lytle

Janis Stevens is Vivien.

weaves in and out of her stage and screen roles, including, of course, Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche DuBois, but also Ophelia, Juliet, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, and Antigone.

This is a fascinating portrait that rings with veracity, a quality often missing from celebrity-based monodramas. *Vivien* is a sad story told with exhilaration. ▼

*Vivien: The Triumph and Madness of Vivien Leigh* will run at the Magic Theatre through Oct. 7. Tickets are \$25 and \$30. Call 441-3687.