

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Janis Stevens Gives a Compelling Performance as *Vivien*

Also see Richard's review of [Sirena, Queen of the Tango](#)

The Magic Theatre is currently presenting Janis Stevens in her one person show called *Vivien, the Triumph and Madness*. Ms. Stevens gives a remarkable performance in an 85 minute, no intermission production written by Rick Foster. In many of the scenes she looks like Vivien Leigh. I worked with Ms. Leigh on *Streetcar Named Desire* and I swear that sometimes I was seeing the great actress on this stage. She has the smile, the mannerism and the voice down to a tee.

The play takes place in 1967 as Vivien wanders onto a darkened London theater stage. She has been cast in the London premier of *A Delicate Balance* and she thinks she has come for a read through of the Albee script. She finds the theater abandoned and she is swept into a journey with the specters of her theatrical and personal past.

The playwright and actress portrays Ms. Leigh as a complex character. Sometimes charming and full of sparkling humor, you also see her gradual decline into alcoholism, madness and tuberculosis by middle age.

The actress talks to great artists Noel Coward, Katherine Hepburn and others. She expounds on her wonderful celebrity marriage to Laurence Olivier and how this became a curse in her later life. She even hints on Lord Olivier's closet homosexuality. "Vivien" talks at great length about her professional roles in *Gone with the Wind* and *Streetcar Named Desire* and her great roles in Shakespeare plays and George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. There is also a wonderful story of Winston Churchill visiting her in her dressing room after a performance one night. In some of the scenes she acts some of her most famous roles; Scarlett, Blanche, Antigone, Juliet, Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth.

Toward the end of the play, she becomes confusing, particularly during

her descent into madness. We really do not know what caused this plunge. She talks about being treated for depression with electro shock therapy and these scenes are chilling.

The set is simple, consisting of a chaise lounge and some hanging sheets that Ms. Stevens uses as props. She wears a simple black slip throughout the performance and adds various robes and coats. This is tour de force acting on the part of Janis Stevens.