

Felder makes points with humor, grace – and juggling

Performance artist charms fest audience

BY CHRISTOPHER POTTER
News Arts Writer

I think I like Sara Felder more as a person than as a performer, which is as high a performance compliment as I can pay.

Billed as "The Greatest Jewish Lesbian Juggler in The World," Felder is all these things plus the owner of a powerful heart. In "June Bride," last evening's one-woman Ann Arbor Summer Festival offering at Lydia Mendelssohn, the Brooklyn native-turned San Francisco performance artist put a large Mendelssohn audience not only in stitches but also in a warm and fuzzy mood with a radiation level all its own. This woman may be a sophisticate, but she's most assuredly not a cynic.

She is one heck of a good juggler: During "June Bride" Felder tosses not only standard juggler's balls and rings, but multi-colored scarves (just try and juggle scarves in the air!), threateningly large knives (while discussing circumcision), traffic-light-colored blocks (which she often dropped deliberately and made it seem accidental – an art in itself). She also plays necromancer to a crystal ball which appears to float in midair while she talks to God radiantly and protectively about her lover and bride-to-be, closing with a soft "Amen" that concludes Act I on a profoundly touching note.

Being both Jewish and lesbian provides Felder plenty of material to discourse on, and she does so with a refreshing

absence of grudge-holding pessimism. When she told the Mendelssohn audience, "I don't know how many of you have actually been in a room filled with straight people, but it's really weird!" I didn't detect a hint of turn-the-tables malice, just genuine joy at triumphantly reversing a hetero cliché.

Nor did I sense bitter undertones in her hilarious description of how she broke the news of her impending "domestic partner" marriage to lover-musician Devra Nolly to her parents:

"I have good news and bad news. The bad news is I'm going to spend the rest of my life with someone with approximately the same earning potential. The good news is she's Jewish."

Far from implying moral superiority, Felder inverted another anti-gay aphorism in her huffy reaction to Mom's revelation of having a male-handyman lover some 50 years younger: "OK, great! But do you have to announce it to the world?" I didn't sense any audience-bullying in her requesting the Mendelssohn throng to sing "You Are My Sunshine" (a song her long-absentee father used to sing), while she wriggled out of a straightjacket while balancing on a makeshift see-saw as well as holding a trim-line phone on her shoulder ("I said keep going!").

Felder's interweaving of bodily motion into her gender/family/religious monologue creates a show of offbeat grace unlike anything I've seen before. Mate that with its creator's good heart, and I'm ready to conclude that what the world needs now is Sara, sweet Sara.