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Felder speaks to the juggler in all of us

BY JUDITH NEWMARK
Post-Dispatch Theater Critic

Last weekend, Sara Felder got the fifth season of the Women CenterStage series at the Center of Contemporary Arts off to a flying start.

Make that a ball-leaping, scarf-twirling, knife-flinging start.

In "June Bride," Felder makes her astonishing feats as a juggler into a metaphor for the difficulties in achieving some kind of balance in life.

That's an issue everybody deals with. Felder, however, draws on her own life to come up with particularly vivid examples.

How easy can it be, after all, for a lesbian couple to have a traditional Jewish wedding?

Felder lets us know exactly how that feels: She has herself bound up in a straitjacket, then extricates herself while balancing on a seesaw and answering the phone.

Point taken.

Since she last performed "June Bride" here in 1996 at the old St. Marcus Theatre, Felder has made

a few changes. A prayer — first manifested with the juggling of a crystal ball, a brilliantly evanescent touch — became tender and evocative when she repeated it in Yiddish. The unveiling of a T-shirt with the name "Ashcroft" inscribed in a red circle, sliced by a diagonal line, brought roars of laughter.

But aside from that one timely, political moment, Felder makes a point of welcoming anyone who might be in the audience. Not everyone is Jewish, not everyone is lesbian and certainly not everyone dreams of a traditional wedding. But Felder's appealing blend of humor and personal warmth makes sure that everyone in the audience feels included.

Whether she's impersonating her mother (back curved, hand to throat, shrewd New York accent), recounting the agony of a first date

(when the choice between black tea or herbal must be carefully weighed so as not to send the "wrong signal") or dolling herself up in a long white silky gown, Felder pokes fun at herself and her life. The sweet, humorous combination is easy to relate to.

Except in terms of juggling. Her gravity-defying stunts look impossible. Even so, who isn't a juggler, one way or another? Felder's juggling makes visible the balancing act we all perform daily. Maybe the applause wasn't for her alone.

The Women CenterStage series will resume with a concert by jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon on Feb. 2 and 3, followed by Joan Borysenko's workshop on female spirituality in March and Stacie Lents in a one-woman play, "Six Hands," in April. For more information, call COCA at 314-725-6555.

Review theater