

Yarn-spinning

It's easy—surrendering to the spells
being cast this weekend at Mobius

by John Dennis Anderson

Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping,
a performance by Marilyn
Arsem with Helen Shlien,
at Mobius, Dec. 3-5, 10-12.

Marilyn Arsem spins a hell of a yarn in her performance art piece *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping*, continuing through Saturday at Mobius. It is precisely a combination of the infernal and the domestic arts that Arsem aims to weave in this atmospheric storytelling experience.

The performance begins with Arsem greeting each audience member at the door with a tuft of wool. We are participants, but don't worry—this is not in-your-face shock art. It's more like being told a story at bedtime or drowsing by your grandmother's fire. Once Arsem gets us twisting the wool, feeling and smelling the lanolin that has softened the hands of spinners for centuries; once we have acclimated to the magic forest environment surrounding us: the piles of wool, the two antique spinning wheels, the cauldron; once we have gotten used to the mysterious figure (Helen Shlien) sweeping a mound of flour in the center of the floor... we relax. Our minds begin to loop and spin, caught in the spell of Arsem's soothing, unassuming voice.

Arsem evolved the piece out of three iconic images: the woman at the spinning wheel, the woman over the cauldron, and

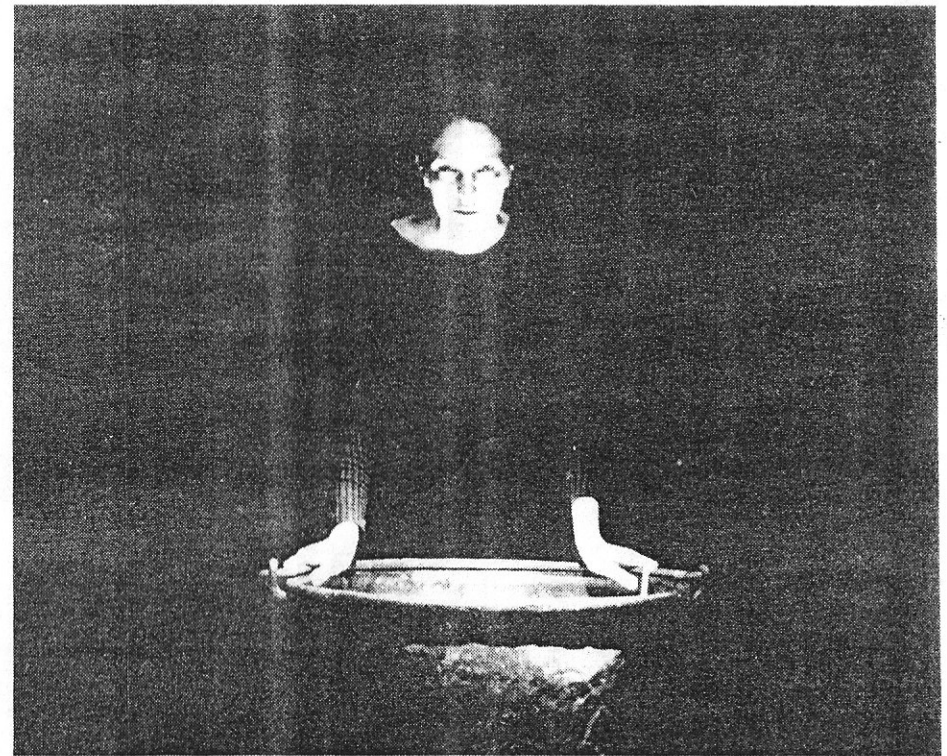
the woman with the broom. The last one is—literally—the central image. As the piece plays out, Shlien sweeps the mound of flour in a gradually widening circle with a crude, witchlike broom. Her action unites the polarities of ritual and mundanity, of the whiteness of bread and the blackness of dirt; she is a constant reminder of the ceaselessness of domestic work.

Around the perimeter of Shlien's magic circle, Arsem begins to invoke the second image: the woman at the spinning wheel. She traces the evolutionary history of textiles from the drop spindle up to the spinning jenny in an anecdotal lecture interspersed with family and folk stories. As the lights slowly dim—imperceptibly at first—the stories begin to take eerie turns and Arsem's persona becomes more and more strange, almost uncanny.

Approaching myth

At first, Arsem's stories about her grandmother seem to come from the turn of the century. Gradually, though, they begin to slip backward in time to previous centuries until history and myth merge. One story recurs, of a woman spinning a shroud out of nettles, but the ultimate destination of this journey is into the world of the Brothers Grimm, into the story of *Sleeping Beauty*. Is it myth or is it family history? The distinction no longer holds.

The third image, that of the woman over the cauldron, is most vividly evoked when Arsem begins to dye wool in the



MARILYN ARSEM, spinner of tales. Photo: Bob Raymond

cauldron. The lighting is stark, seeming to emanate from the cauldron and casting sinister shadows on Arsem's face. The witch archetype that she embodies is powerful, but not *quite* frightening, combining as she does the familiar domestic with the supernatural.

When Arsem takes us into the world of *Sleeping Beauty*, she is good fairy, evil fairy, and princess all in one. All boundaries seem to blur, all the world is spinning, spinning into eternal sleep, and there is no phallic prick of the finger to induce it, no patriarchal kiss to awaken us.

Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping weaves a potent spell if you let it. In its warp and

woof are countless associations, echoes, pieces of dreams and of our collective unconscious. Arsem has assembled, as she says, "the tools and activities of woman's daily work for hundreds and hundreds of years. It is no wonder that they show up in fairy tales and myths."

Marilyn Arsem's previous work has been more visually and less verbally oriented. This new direction is tremendously promising, both for Arsem and her audiences. ▼

For tix to *Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping*, at Mobius (354 Congress St., Boston), call 542-7416.