

Putting a universal spin on female perseverance

By Patti Hartigan
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In Marilyn Arsem's "Stirring, Spinning, Sweeping," time is a circle with women at its core. Using the history of textile production as a running theme, Arsem

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artfully weaves together myth, folklore and fairy tales to create an image of Everywoman throughout the ages — oppressed yet resilient, pragmatic yet spiritual.

The piece begins slowly, as Arsem traces the development of spinning from the simple drop spindle to the flyer and bobbin assembly. Surrounded by spinning wheels and pounds of 100 percent virgin wool, she speaks in a lulling monotone, telling stories about her grandmother and her sisters.

At first, it seems like the evening at Mobius is going to be yet another autobiography with lights so common in performance art. Far from it. The personal becomes universal as it becomes clear that the "grandmothers" here represent women in all cultures and time; they're related to all of us. There's the Woburn woman who practiced medicine in 1651, the so-called spinsters sewing dowries, the woman who is sexually harassed by the mayor.

These "grandmothers" all have something in common: they spin wool. Their ancestral sisters are Penelope in "The Odyssey," weaving by day and unraveling by night, and the miller's daughter in "Rumpelstiltskin" who weaves flax into gold — for a price. In a society forged by men, they labor arduously at their task, and their reward is bondage. There are no Prince Charmings, or even reasonably acceptable Sensitive Men, in these tales. But the women persevere.

Mobius founder Arsem makes her point seamlessly here, using simple storytelling methods in a departure from previous work (notably the piece in which she baked bread and hair onstage). Dressed in her trademark loose granny frock, she talks and spins, treating simple facts and mystical tales with the same seem-

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STIRRING, SPINNING, SWEEPING
Performance Piece by Marilyn Arsem
At: Mobius, 354 Congress St., Boston,
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ingly casual tone. But there's an edge to the delivery, a sense of grim mortality lurking in the looms. Arsem is like Edward Gorey with a female sensibility. Sweetly, she tells of a woman who blesses a newborn with a curse: "This child will die in her 15th year." Quietly, she announces that the average spinner in Colonial times walked 20 miles a day, moving back and forth from the wheel.

The effect is a kind of sinister calm.

All of this unfolds in the Mobius black box space, which is transformed into a domestic sorceress' lair. Dried plants hang from the ceiling; Arsem is surrounded by a circle of wool and a caldron reminiscent of "Macbeth." At the outset, the audience members are each given a piece of raw wool and, true to the participatory style Mobius is known for, they are asked to spin it into thread. But there's nothing outrageously arty about this; the audience is invited into the story, that's all.

Throughout the hourlong performance, the dutiful Helen Shlien (who used to run a gallery at the Mobius loft in Fort Point Channel) sweeps a mound of flour into a large circle. Dressed in a loose black frock, Shlien represents the monotony of women's work. She's the visual manifestation of Arsem's many grandmothers. Her presence not only links Mobius to its past, it also completes the circle of the women in the stories, linking then with now and now-with-then.