

## Of Tanne transports audience to Karen Blixen's Africa



Joan Gale in *Of Tanne*

### OF TANNE

Written and performed by Joan Gale.

At Mobius.

Nov. 1-3 and 8-10, at 8 pm.

By SIMSON L. GARFINKEL

I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO AFRICA, but after watching Joan Gale's *Of Tanne* at Mobius last year, I had a much better idea of what I had been missing.

*Of Tanne* is the story of Karen Blixen, who moved to East Africa in 1914 to operate her family's farm. Walking into the theater is walking into Blixen's living room on the farm in East Africa: A tapestry adorns the wall, tea is served for the audience, and photo albums of Blixen, her family, and the African natives sit on the end tables, inviting the audience to thumb through them.

After a short pause, Gale rises and walks to the center of the room. There she slowly unfolds Blixen's story, primarily through readings taken from Blixen's letters to her mother and aunt. The performance lasts two and a half hours, with intermission, but is riveting throughout.

Gale is uniquely qualified among the Mobius Performance Group's members to tell the story of Blixen, having visited Kenya three times in the 1960s. (Her brother is a teacher at the United States International University and has lived there for the past 15 years.) Her strength is that she can draw from her own experiences as well as Blixen's.

Although I have not seen this year's performance, Gale says that it is similar to last year's, with the addition of more furniture that is actually from her own living room. Also, more of the performance is designed to create a sense of the African world outside Blixen's farm. The trick, says Gale, is to do this without sacrificing her portrait of Blixen.

"People really come to hear the letters," she says. "I'm trying more to put [them] in the context of Kenya — I'm trying to have the audience take an overall view."

For example, says Gale, "I've added more from her letters dealing with [the destruction of] Africa. She says to her brother, 'Alas, alack, I grieve for what we have done and are doing to this country, and the civilization we are bringing to it.'"

Gale feels a link not just with Africa, but with Blixen herself. "I read *Out of Africa* [written by Blixen] in 1968 and had a complete identification," says Gale. "That was my third trip there." When she read Blixen's letters in 1985, the identification was even stronger — and she was overcome by the need to perform them before an audience.

Not only does the performance do justice to Africa, it does justice to Blixen as well.

Gale's Blixen is a woman struggling with her role in society, and what her society is doing to the world around it. Although this is a recurrent theme in today's literature, this is a very different story than is common today. "This woman comes from an incredibly different period," says Gale. "She loves the aristocracy." Indeed, Blixen is a woman who wants equal rights for herself, but not necessarily for all.

For this reason, many of today's feminists might find Blixen offensive under close examination. Those who do should look deeper into themselves, says Gale: "Here is this woman who you may not think you like, and [you] may not approve of her values, but listen and see how similar she is [to you]."

In *Of Tanne*, the set, the smells, the words and ideas all combine like pieces of a puzzle to transport the audience into Blixen's world. "It is really not just the African story, but the story of the woman herself," says Gale. And it is *that* story that she does such a good job of portraying.