

Life unfolds at cards

By Kevin Prokosh, Theatre Writer

In Carol Shields's lovely new play, *Thirteen Hands*, four generations of "white glove ladies" kibbitz around the bridge table, dealing cards and sloughing off life's indignities.

No one keeps score in the Prairie Theatre Exchange production, but Shields must be congratulated for bringing home a cleverly played small slam, worthy of Goren himself. This thanks primarily to her trump card – that rare gift of making the mundane seem exceptional.

The decks appeared stacked against the well-known Winnipeg novelist. She seeks to celebrate the uncelebrated, those misunderstood, undervalued women known as homemakers who spend their afternoons around the card table while the real world works.

Barefoot

Roaming barefoot about an elegant stage awash in lace and cream-colored material – both used as tablecloths for the card table – actors Nancy Drake, Linda Huffman, Colleen Tillotson and Karen Garner adopt the roles of women of different generations who meet Tuesdays with Clara for bridge.

With a warmth characteristic of her writing, Shields finds the overlooked humor, courage and resilience in her characters' lives without resorting to cheap sentimentality.

Although the word bridge is never uttered in *Thirteen Hands*, the popular card game is the metaphor on which the play is built. Shields sees the card table as a refuge where ordinary women retreat to find friendship and understanding.

It's a place where marginalized women can speak from their hearts. Says one player evocatively, "I feel invisible. It started not long after my 15th birthday...It's like I'm not here anymore."

Through their table talk and a string of bouncy songs, shields makes the case that it was the hands of these women that quietly held together homes and families, that their lives had value not measured highly by a hero-worshipping public.

Unfashionable

In an age of electronic escapism, *Thirteen Hands* can hardly be described as drop-dead exciting. But unfashionable as it may be, Shields's beautifully written memory play exposes the humanity of these women.

Its anecdotal structure features no rising action or clear conflict. This will prove a hurdle for some people, but it proves appropriate as the audience follows the shifting and interlocking relationships among the characters.

Always in control of her material, Shields never false-cards. She introduces cold, clipboard-toting intruders who ask Clara for the bottom-line on her behavior. Why didn't she accomplish something valuable instead of playing cards?

Answers Clara, closing Act 1, "It isn't just a game, you know."

Later she says, "It was like we were making something, a kind of handiwork. At that table I knew exactly where I was."