

'Only When I Laugh' Defies Labels

By STEVE HALL

For Sally-Jane Heit, being a woman is no laughing matter.

Her night club act, "Only When I Laugh," is mostly a laughing matter, but along the way her performance at the Indiana Repertory Theater's Cabaret is sprinkled with anxiety, pain, anger, frustration and vulnerability.

All this is brought off by an accomplished performer who switches from actress to comedienne to singer as quickly and brilliantly as she changes persona — and the fewest of props.

"Only When I Laugh" is a humorous exploration of the "contemporary woman": Careerist, mother, lover. Ms. Heit, a frequent face on Broadway, probes the female psyche through a series of devastatingly funny monologues about the life and friends of Harriet Ferment.

The lines come at a furious pace, so much so that a few better ones zinged across the heads of last night's audience with little recognition.

That partly relates to the nature of this act: One doesn't have to be a woman to appreciate Ms. Heit's wit, but women in the crowd seemed to have a more complete understanding of what she was talking about.

The show begins with the house lights still on, and a frazzled Ms. Heit cracking some jokes about having to do everything.

She's greeted by an empty piano stool. The pianist, her brother-in-law, is missing — "That's what I get for doing my sister a favor," she tells us. She announces herself and launches unaccompanied into the first number, interrupted by the stumbling arrival of her "brother-in-law" — actually local musician Royce Thrush.

With Thrush's entrance, Ms. Heit takes the audience straight into the "Hindsight Saga of Harriet Ferment."

Harriet's complex. She had an unhappy child-

hood, with a mother who liked strange sayings like: "It doesn't take a dog in heat to know the bloom is off the rose."

At school, she overheard she was the ugliest girl in the class in the restroom: "In the girls' room it's awfully hard to know whose feet you could be hurting the feelings of."

After a brief interlude at summer camp — the show's only happy moment — Harriet is married to the klutzy, weak Franklin Ferment.

Of course, the audience never sees him — or their daughter Nina, Harriet's mother, a swinging male dental hygienist or the other grab-bag of characters that populate the stage for an hour and a half — but they're all very real because of Ms. Heit's skill as an actress.

With a scarf, she's a summer camper. The next minute, she's Harriet's friend Marsha, eating imaginary Twinkies and haranguing Harriet over the phone. Then with a twitching of the eyelids and a tilt of the head, she's the suave Edith, "the only person who went through puberty without a pimple."

As Harriet's life moves into motherhood, lawyerhood, divorce and lonely singles' bar regular, Ms. Heit runs the gamut of human emotions, from wry humor to desperation.

A final scene is brutal and chillingly effective, as Harriet cracks before a psychiatrist. The scene is powerful, and at that moment the raw emotion is so unexpected it throws the audience off guard.

One can't decide whether to cry or applaud. Both are deserved.

Accompanied by Thrush's adroit playing, Ms. Heit shows equal enthusiasm and vigor as a singer. She alternates with ease between belting out numbers and slow but still very funny torch songs like "Somebody's Wrong."

The only negative part about "Only When I Laugh" is that it defies description. The show is a moving mixture of drama, comedy, music, and Ms. Heit deserves all the acclaim it has drawn.