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Review: 'I Remember Mama' at Two River Theater Profits From Creative Casting

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Barbara Andres as Mama, sitting at the head of the table, with, from left: Heather Mac Rae as Nels, Dale Soules as Papa, Rita Gardner as Aunt Trina and Mia Katigbak as Katrin. The cast of older women play more than 20 roles, many written for men and for younger actors. Credit T. Charles Erickson

"People's hearts don't break," a character claims in "I Remember Mama." Then she adds, "Only in books."

She's mistaken on both counts, because I had my own broken a little during this lovely and peculiar production. Indeed, though her words are wrong, almost everything else in the play, at Two River Theater in Red Bank, feels right.

I had no desire to revisit “I Remember Mama” since seeing a community theater production ages ago. This well-worn story has gone in and out of favor, often as a staple of high-school theaters. But in this cast, you won’t find anyone within 40 years of adolescence.

The production, originally staged by the Transport Group in 2014 in New York, features 10 actresses, all of whom are youthful despite being in their 60s, 70s and 80s. At first, this may appear to be a gimmick, these older women playing more than 20 roles, many written for men and for younger actors. Yet a few minutes into it, you’ll wonder why more troupes don’t take such strange and smart chances.

“I Remember Mama” had its Broadway premiere in 1944 and ran for over 20 months. (Marlon Brando made his Broadway debut as Nels, the family’s young son.) In the story, set in 1910, Katrin, the oldest of three daughters, yearns to become a published writer. She struggles toward her dream as her family undergoes several ordeals: Illness strikes the youngest daughter; a marriage proposal brings about some stress; and there’s always a lack of money in the home.

Through it all, the extended family prevails, affectionately. The immigrant parents at the center, far from their roots in Norway after moving to San Francisco, sacrifice everything for their children, but they get just as much in return. As written by John Van Druten, based on a novel by Kathryn Forbes, the play is so gummy-sweet that my fingers seem to stick to the keyboard just writing about it.

Yet something marvelous happens when these women inhabit their roles, in everyday clothes instead of period costumes. Such a staging urges the audience to exercise its imagination, making us all partners in the production rather than mere spectators. Granted, theater always relies on the suspension of disbelief. But here the immersion is deeper and more satisfying. Because of the actresses’ ages, all these characters seem to be simultaneously recalling the past and living in it.

Barbara Andres, as the Mama of the title, has traveled with the show from its 2014 production. She’s the bedrock of this family and of the play, and her scenes with Mia Katigbak, as Katrin, are poignant. The one in which Katrin learns her mother traded an heirloom for a gift for her is deeply touching.

Lynn Cohen, as both Mr. Hyde, a boarder, and Uncle Chris, a man whose cranky exterior hides a golden soul, is a joy as she savors these bombastic roles. Rita Gardner, as the timid Aunt Trina, is a fine contrast and just as exciting to watch. Heather Mac Rae, as Nels, drives a gentle early scene as the boy appeals to his family in hopes of attending high school.

Alice Cannon, Marjorie Johnson, Susan Lehman, Louise Sorel and Dale Soules round out the cast, whose rapport is all the better for being so unforced. (Reading the cast biographies is also a treat — Ms. Lehman’s first Broadway role was in 1962; Ms. Andres’s in 1969. Ms. Gardner originated the role of the Girl in “The Fantasticks,” in 1960.) Several of the cast members were in the 2014 production, directed by Jack Cummings III, who also directs this one.

They perform on Dane Laffrey’s set — 10 tables that hold various objects. Everything here, too, spurs the imagination. Only the theater itself can be problematic. For its initial run, the play opened at the Gym at Judson in Manhattan’s West Village, a welcoming space for such an intimate show. The larger Two River, however, leaves far more distance between the performers and audience. I worry for those in the upper rows.

Still, the actresses are remarkably crisp and handle the staging with skill. They’ve also taught me a thing or two about expectations. While I had no wish to see the play, it now feels that had I missed this production, a wonderful opportunity would have been lost.

“I Remember Mama” continues at Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, through June 26. For more information: 732-345-1400; tworivertheater.org.