



A “Mama” To Remember At Two River Theater

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By Philip Dorian

It's a safe bet that Heather Mac Rae never dreamed she'd be cast in a role created by Marlon Brando. No, the venerable actress is not playing Terry Malloy in a remake of “On the Waterfront.” She is, however, playing Nels in the all-female-age-60-plus “I Remember Mama” at Two River Theater Company, a role Brando created on Broadway in 1944 at one-third that age.

Further, playwright John Van Druten could not have imagined his 22 characters, of both sexes aged from eight to about 50, being performed by ten women whose longevity is sometimes referred to as *of-a-certain-age*. But stranger things have happened. The “Mama” casting is a testament to theatrical imagination, in this case that of director Jack Cummings III, co-founder and artistic director of Transport Group Theatre Company, where this production originated.

The question of whether or not “I Remember Mama” holds up after 72 years is rendered moot by Cumming's vision. Somewhere between gimmick and resuscitation, it sets Hamlet's “The play's the thing” on its ear; here, the casting's the thing. It takes a while to separate play from performance, but eventually the two mesh, especially when emotionally charged moments allow the women to loose their talents.

The play is adapted from Kathryn Forbes's memory-novel “Mama's Bank Account,” just as Van Druten had also adapted Christopher Isherwood's “Berlin Stories” into “I Am a Camera,” which in turn became “Cabaret.” This is not to minimize Van Druten's accomplishment. You think it's easy? Pick up a novel and try it.



From left: Heather Mac Rae, Dale Soules, Barbara Andres (seated), Susan Lehman, Mia Katigbak, Louise Sorel in "I Remember Mama"

The play is built around Katrin (Mia Katigbak), a stand-in for the original author, as she writes about her Norwegian-American family in early 20th-Century San Francisco, with Mama (Barbara Andres) at the hub of every compressed anecdote. Katigbak and Andres play their characters throughout, while eight other women take on the 20 others: two other daughters, a son, aunts, an uncle and sundry.

Ms. Andres embodies the unflappable forbearance of the wise and loving matriarch. Her immersive performance is like a maternal embrace. Ms. Katigbak acts the frustrated writer convincingly. Her mature-age audience-directed narrations could be warmer, more congenial, but they move the story along.



Mama (Barbara Andres) comforts eight-year old Dagmar (Marjorie Johnson)

The male roles are among the most evocative. Besides the teen son, Ms. Mac Rae plays the diffident fiancé of Aunt Trina (Rita Gardner). The couple's tentative dowry scene with gruff Uncle Chris, one of two male roles played to perfection by Lynn Cohen, is a gem. Dale Soules is Papa, man of few phrases. Ms. Soules makes every one count with impeccable comic timing. Among the others, Marjorie Johnson's age-accurate daughter Dagmar (about eight, according to Van Druten) stands out, and there's nary a fault among Alice Cannon, Susan Lehman and Louise Sorel in a passel of other roles.

The doubling and tripling tends to inhibit continuity, and director Cummings' propensity for staging scenes as far upstage as possible and in a far corner to boot, does not enhance the proceedings. Designer Dane Lafferty's set is ten various-shaped and adorned tables, presumably representing the ten actors. It is not an easily navigated floor plan.

Cast and performed as it is, the play will likely appeal to theatergoers of like gender and age, a demographic to whom I can wholeheartedly recommend this "I Remember Mama".

Through June 26 at Two River Theater, Red Bank NJ. Wed at 1PM and 7PM; Thurs at 1 and 8; Fri at 8; Sat 3 and 8; Sun at 3PM. Tickets (\$37-\$65): 732-345-1400 or online at www.tworivertheater.org