

Talkin' BROADWAY

Regional Reviews: New Jersey

I Remember Mama

Two River Theater

Review by Cameron Kelsall



Dale Soules, Alice Cannon, Susan Lehman, and Barbara Andres

Photo by T. Charles Erickson

Second chances are rare in theater, a medium ephemeral by nature. A show has its run—be it two weeks or two decades—and then it's assigned to the annals, and to the memory of those who saw it. Occasionally, though, the public gets a second chance to see a worthwhile production return after its brief initial run. Such is the case of Transport Group's 2014

Off-Broadway production of John Van Druten's *I Remember Mama*, now in New Jersey to close the season at Red Bank's Two River Theater. Its reappearance should make any devoted theatergoer rejoice.

Druten adapted *I Remember Mama* from Kathryn Forbes' memoir "Mama's Bank Account"; it was first produced on Broadway in 1944 and enjoyed a healthy run of 713 performances. A successful film adaptation followed in 1948, starring Irene Dunne and Barbara Bel Geddes. It even served as the source of Richard Rodgers' final musical, in 1979, a vehicle for the noted Scandinavian chanteuse Liv Ullmann. As a play, it is very representative of its time: a classic kitchen-sink drama about a Norwegian-American family working hard to get by in turn-of-the-century San Francisco, facing challenges with healthy amounts of grit, determination, and love.

The current production—directed with near-surgical precision by Jack Cummings III, Transport Group's co-founder and artistic director—is what some might term a radical reinterpretation. The play features over twenty-five characters, men and women alike, ranging in age from seven to seventy. Here, the roles are taken by ten women actors, all aged over sixty. They wear comfortable contemporary clothing; a change in vocal inflection or physical stature is all that's done to signify that a new character has been assumed. Nothing has changed in the text, which is still presented through the narration of Katrin (Mia Katigbak), the family's eldest daughter, who grows up to be a writer and makes her name by telling the family history.

Mama is played by the veteran actor Barbara Andres, who gives a master class in subtlety and reaction. She is a woman from the "old country" who has proudly assimilated into American life, and has worked tirelessly to give her children the best of everything. Andres conveys the fierce loyalty and protection Mama bestows on her family without an ounce of histrionics. I challenge anyone to show me a more affecting piece of acting happening on a stage right now than a simple scene shared by Andres and Katigbak in which Andres expresses her wish to return to Norway as a tourist, to visit the grave of her first-born child—the child she and Papa (Dale Soules, superb) left behind to make a new life.

Eight of the ten actors, including Andres and Soules, appeared in the New York production of the play; only Katigbak and Marjorie Johnson (playing several roles, including the family's youngest child, Dagmar) are new. This is a chain with no weak links, but several standouts. In particular, Lynn Cohen does exceedingly fine work as the family's effete boarder Mr. Hyde, and especially as Uncle Chris, Mama's uncle and the "head" of the family. Left lame by a childhood accident that the family could not afford to treat, it is revealed that Uncle Chris—who presents himself as gruff and grizzled, and likes his glass of brandy—secretly pays for crippled children to have operations to repair their failing limbs. It would be difficult to not get a little misty when Mama defends Uncle Chris' good nature to her judgmental sisters, who are played with plenty of vim and vinegar by Alice Cannon, Rita Gardner, and Susan Lehman.

The fine cast also includes Heather MacRae as Katrin's kindhearted older brother Nels, and Louise Sorel as her emotional sister Christine. Both are wonderful, as is Katigbak, who effortlessly moves between her roles as narrator and family member, clear-eyed adult and wide-eyed teenager. Johnson is uncannily good at projecting Dagmar's precocity; in a later scene, she's heartbreaking as Uncle Chris' longtime companion, whom all but Mama shun as a fallen woman.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this production is that it wrings genuine emotion from what is so clearly a sentimentalist story. This is not to knock Van Druten or Forbes, who wrote for an audience with very different expectations than what many readers or theatergoers want now. But anyone who's sat through a slavishly literal production of a kitchen-sink play can tell you that it's not always a pleasant experience. How wonderful, then, to watch *I Remember Mama* and not want it to end.

I Remember Mama continues at Two River Theater's Joan and Robert Rechnitz Theater (21 Bridge Avenue in Red Bank) through Sunday, June 26, 2016. Tickets (\$20-65) can be purchased online at www.tworivertheater.org, by phone (732-345-1400), or in person at the box office (Hours: Monday-Saturday, 10-6; Sunday, 12-5; and one hour prior at curtain).