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BETTER WITH AGE

"I Remember Mama" is reimaged with an all-female cast.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELEANOR DAVIS

By Hilton Als

Transport Group revives the 1944 play, about a family of Norwegian immigrants in San Francisco.

George Stevens's greatness as a filmmaker is in part attributable to his ability to clear sentimentality out of the way and focus on the emotional realism of his characters' lives. After directing Katharine Hepburn in the 1935 adaptation of Booth Tarkington's underrated, if a trifle treacly, novel "Alice Adams," Stevens went to work, in 1948, on "I Remember Mama." The piece began as a novel. Written by Kathryn Forbes and published in 1943, "Mama's Bank Account" describes how a family of Norwegian immigrants, the Hansons, make a life for themselves and their first-generation Norwegian-American children in San Francisco in the early twentieth century. Filled with evocative characters—Forbes wrote a great deal for radio, and her ear for dialogue is sweet and snappy—the book's occasional sentimental strain wasn't done away with in John Van Druten's 1944 stage adaptation. (Playing Nels, the Hansons' only boy, was a young actor named Marlon Brando.) But what family story isn't without its sentiment? In the black-and-white film of "I Remember Mama," Stevens beautifully employs the closeup to dramatize intimacy and to evoke time past: the world was different then, and we see it differently because of his cinematography.

When I saw Transport Group's amazing revival of the play, in 2014, all these elements—what Stevens wrought, what Forbes wrote—were right there on the stage. Working from Van Druten's script, the twenty-five characters were played by ten veteran actresses, with the incomparable Barbara Barrie in the lead. The performers, all older than sixty, had faces that time had added to, not disfigured, and it was the experience that one saw on their faces and time-enriched bodies that gave their private moments such incredible depth, humor, and truth. Fortunately for us, the show is returning, again directed by Jack Cummings III, at Two River Theatre, in Red Bank, New Jersey (through June 26), with some members of the cast from Cummings's first iteration, including Barbara Andres and

Lynn Cohen. The actresses take to the stage with the fervor of stars a third their age, in part because of Cummings's support and inventive staging, and because of their ability to relax in who they are now, while using the wisdom of age to inform their collective imagination.



Hilton Als, The New Yorker's theatre critic, has been a staff writer since 1994.