

Two River's 'I Remember Mama' gets new life with mature, all-female cast



Marjorie Johnson, left, as Dagmar and Barbara Andres as Mama in Two River Theater's production of "I Remember Mama." (T. Charles Erickson)



By **Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media**

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John Van Druten's "I Remember Mama" is a 1944 chestnut of American theater, teeming with sentimental portrayals of family life and maudlin scenes of perseverance in the face of struggle, all built around familiar character archetypes. It is sweet, safe, and unchallenging.

But in 2014, New York's Transport Group theater company pushed this comfortable play into unfamiliar terrain by casting ten veteran actresses — each of whom is perfectly well suited to the title role — to play all 20-plus roles, men, women, and children alike. Directed by Jack Cummings III, the production enjoyed a warmly received six-week run, during which audiences seemed to enjoy the cozy family story as much as they marveled at the power of the excellent ensemble.

Cummings and most of his ensemble return to Mama's hearth and home as **Red Bank's Two River Theater** remounts Transport Group's production. Ten superb actresses, each over the age of 60 with miles-long bios of stage and screen experience, impress with their range and depth, while Cummings' stylized staging underscores the force of family that unifies the play's disparate stories.

'West Side Story' at Paper Mill is a rousing season finale



Van Druten's play does not offer much that is compelling beyond trite nostalgia, but Cummings and the Transport Group have managed at least to stage an intellectually engaging version of that sentimentality.

The play is a memory framed by the narrative of Katrin (Mia Katigbak), the middle of three children in the San Francisco house of a Norwegian family. Mama (Barbara Andres) and Papa (Dale Soules) are immigrants who followed their families to America, where they are now doing their best to instill ethics of work and family in their children.

Over the course of the play the family faces a variety of trials — eldest child Nels (Heather MacRae) wants to go to high school and the family must scrimp money to afford it; youngest daughter Dagmar (Marjorie Johnson) must have ear surgery; Aunt Trina decides to marry at 42, but wants a dowry; family patriarch Uncle Chris is an alcoholic; Mr. Elizabeth the cat defiantly stares down death — but there is nothing we might call a central conflict. Instead we have an episodic chronicle of a family repeatedly overcoming new struggles through shared strength.

Most of the cast plays more than one role (confusion of characters is not an issue), and all are great despite being faced with what are for the most part flatly drawn characters. Perhaps best is **Lynn Cohen's** Uncle Chris, the drunk, bitter but unflappably loyal head of the extended family. Uncle Chris is fierce and imposing, something that may seem out of range for a slight, gray-haired woman, but Cohen seizes the character fully and assertively. Andres' selfless Mama is also a powerful presence at the play's center.

After the unique casting, this production evolves away from a reverential staging of a classic with Dane Laffrey's evocatively drab set. The stage looks like the forgotten back display room of a cheap secondhand furniture store where we find ten sets of dining room tables and chairs, all of which may have been fancy in their day but are now dated and piled with books, or china, or silverware, or typewriters. The room has drab walls and is lit with harsh white lights. This is a forgotten room full of forgotten goods, and it is through this that the play's editorial comment becomes strongest.

The women in this cast naturally evoke images of matriarchy, but children to women of this age are likely at a stage of life with increasing independence from and potentially less attention paid to their own mothers. Katrin says in the beginning of her story, "First and foremost, I remember Mama," but the production seems to suggest such a remembrance and respect is not automatic or universal (here's a not-so-wild interpretation worth considering: What if these characters are actually forgotten and discarded mothers who, harshly relegated to this room perform this particular play as a way of reminiscing about the warmth of their family lives?).

By peopling its characters entirely with figures of matriarchy in a room like this, the play invites reflection on the centrality of motherhood in family life and the dangers of overlooking its power. When each of the women sit at different tables, it is the empty chairs around them that often speak loudest.

This production certainly retains the sentimentality inherent to the play, but it couples it with an intriguing concern about a weakening force of family. In the end, it is a play that will make you want to call your mom.

I Remember Mama

Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, through June 26.

Tickets available [online](#).

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