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MY YIDDISHE MAMA: (left to right) Megan Reinking & Donna Murphy (nominated for a Tony) in the schmaltzy musical, *The People in the Picture*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The People in the Picture:

A musical even Jewish mothers couldn't love



THE PEOPLE IN THE PICTURE

Book & lyrics by Iris Rainer Dart

Music by Mike Stoller & Artie Butler

Directed by Leonard Foglia

Through June 19, 2011

Studio 54

254 West 54th Street

(212-719-9393), www.Roundabouttheater.org

By Scott Harrah

The People in the Picture is a well-meaning but ill-conceived musical that purports to show three generations of Jewish women and the troubled history and rich heritage they share. Book and lyric writer Iris Rainer Dart is a master at sentimental schlock. She is perhaps best known for her classic women's weepy novel *Beaches*, later turned into a mega-hit Bette Midler movie. There is definitely some meaningful material here, but almost none of it is funny or amusing enough for musical comedy. Telling stories via flashbacks is a technique best reserved for movies and particularly epic novels—there have been many bestsellers that took readers from Hollywood and New York to the Jewish pogroms of Europe in the 1930s. In a novel, an author can spend an entire chapter taking readers back in time, but it is often too tricky to do that on the stage without confusing audiences.

The only reason anyone might see this lugubrious tearjerker is to witness Broadway veteran Donna

Murphy giving everything she has in the Tony-nominated dual role of Bubbie, an Old World Jewish grandmother in New York City, circa 1977, suffering from dementia; and her younger self, Raisel, a spunky actress in the Yiddish theater in Warsaw, trying to escape Nazi atrocities at the dawn of World War II.

Toss in lots of *tsuris* about the anti-Semitic treatment of Jews in Poland, a baby hidden from Nazis, and friends being murdered; and, back in America, old age, nursing homes, hospitals, and death. Does this all sound like lighthearted fare that would make a great Broadway musical? Of course not, especially when there are so many fun, colorful, upbeat blockbusters this season—from *The Book of Mormon* to *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, the Musical*. Regardless, Ms. Murphy is riveting from start to finish, even when the material she has been handed is gosh-awful absurd, such as "Before We Lose the Light/The Dybbuk," a song that has something to do with Raisel, dancing rabbis, and an evil spirit. What's it all mean? *Oy vey*, please don't ask. Even with Mike Stoller and Artie Butler's klezmer-tinged score, with the harmonic flavor of Ashkenazic Judaism in Eastern Europe, not one song is as remotely memorable or catchy as any of the classics in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Young Rachel Resheff brings the necessary inquisitive charm to Jenny, the little girl who is fascinated by her grandmother's Yiddish sayings and stories of the Old Country. The rest of the cast members do their best to make characters in both America and Poland believable, but a show this complicated needs someone to help patch up the gaping holes in Iris Rainer Dart's book, so part of the blame must go to Leonard Foglia's haphazard direction. One is left wondering what the heck the people were thinking when they gave the green light to *The People in the Picture* to be produced as a Broadway musical. As a straight drama, it *might* have worked in an Off-Broadway venue, but as a musical? *Meshuga* indeed.

Regardless, Ms. Murphy emerges through all of this mediocrity as a true pro, speaking the often contrived dialogue and singing trite lyrics with an authentic Yiddish accent. Many actors might have easily done Bubbie/Raisel as a caricature, but Ms. Murphy makes her both natural and heartbreaking, and that is an amazing feat in a show with such a convoluted narrative.

Published May 8, 2011

Reviewed at press performance on May 6, 2011

Editor's Note: www.StageZine.com, celebrating our 1-Year Anniversary on the Internet. We want to express our gratitude to all the theater PR professionals, industry organizations, and, most of all, our readers, followers and fans for their continued support and kind words throughout the past year, helping make www.StageZine.com a success.

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