

ASBURY & PARK PRESS

A cast of seasoned actresses in “I Remember Mama”



(Photo: courtesy of Transport Group)

By Tom Chesek

It's a show whose cast boasts some “500 Years Experience” — and with a company of ten players, doing the math reveals that we're in the presence of some impressively seasoned performers.

Doing the math figures prominently in “I Remember Mama,” the 1944 hit that detailed the day-to-day struggles and long term dreams of a close-knit, budget-conscious, extended family of Norwegian-Americans in early 20th century San Francisco. Adapted by John Van Druten from Kathryn Forbes' semi-autobiographical novel “Mama's Bank Account,” the ensemble play went on to spawn an Oscar-nominated film with Irene Dunne, a TV series, and a Richard Rodgers musical — all while giving a first Broadway break to a rookie actor named Marlon Brando.

When audiences get a look at the final offering of the 2015-2016 season from Red Bank's Two River Theater Company, they'll discover that this is a different “Mama” than what they might remember. As directed by Jack

Cummings III and originally staged by NYC's Transport Group in 2014, it's a production in which all of the play's 25 men, women and children roles are performed by actresses aged 60 and over.

As Cummings explains, "I felt that older women would be the best people to explore the heart of it;" to "find a way into a play that centers around the idea of memory, of the mother-daughter relationship." Having caught a Turner Classics airing of the 1948 film, the director "really fell in love" with the smartly scripted story that "some people might have dismissed as sugary or sentimental without seeing it."

Developing over the course of two years and numerous table readings, the Transport Group's re-imagined "Mama" brought out "a really well written, solid-oak play about the idea of family...those small moments that define our relationships to each other...as well as people's relationship to money." Indeed, with the action keyed by a scene in which Mama Hanson frantically attempts to balance the family budget against the educational needs of teenaged son Nels — each of the assembled family members offering to sacrifice something of theirs, so that the boy may attend high school — the play takes a too-rare look at the logistics of keeping together a family unit that includes hard-working traditionalists (Mama and Papa), ambitious dreamers (daughter Katrin, an aspiring writer whose diary entries frame this memory play), a literature-loving boarder named Mr. Hyde, and an orbit of relatives that range from sympathetic (Uncle Chris, Aunt Trina) to somewhat snooty.

With many of the players doing double or triple duty, the play's variously comedic and dramatic vignettes are delivered by a company that retains 80 percent of its cast members from the New York production. Barbara Andres returns to the title role that netted her a Drama Desk Award nomination, and she's surrounded by colleagues who can boast some frankly awesome stage credentials — including the very first "Girl" from the Off Broadway phenom "The Fantasticks" (Rita Gardner), an original cast member of Broadway's "Hair" (Heather MacRae), a Helen Hayes Award winner (Alice Cannon), and Barbra Streisand's original Broadway understudy (Susan Lehman).

Also on stage at Two River's Bridge Avenue auditorium are several familiar faces from screens of all dimensions: Lynn Cohen (Magda in "Sex and the City;" Mags in "The Hunger Games"), Dale Soules (Frieda in "Orange is the New Black"), and Louise Sorel (a serial award winner for her soap stints on "Santa Barbara" and "Days of Our Lives," and a veteran of classic soundstages from "Bonanza" to "Star Trek"). They're joined by cast newcomers Marjorie Johnson and Mia Katigbak for a project in which, as Cummings suggests, "you really get to see the range of what these talented women are capable of."

I REMEMBER MAMA

WHERE: Two River Theater, Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

WHEN: Wednesdays to Sundays through June 26

TICKETS: \$20 to \$65

INFO: www.tworivertheater.org or 732-345-1400