

CurtainUp

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It Shoulda Been You

*By Simon Saltzman
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The stereotypical image of the over-bearing, impossible-to-please, emotionally crippling Jewish mother is not one that is easy to erase from our mind, especially considering the acerbic assault on “her” this past week by playwright Nicky Silver in his dark comedy *The Lyons*. It is time this week, however, to sing the praises of relatively new musical theater collaborators Brian Hargrove (book and lyrics, with additional lyrics by “others”) and Barbara Anselmi (music) who have put a Jewish mother who's lovable despite her inevitable failings in the center of a delightfully ebullient, often hilarious, new musical comedy *It Shoulda Been You*.

And what is it that can bring out the best and the worst in a Jewish mother more than overseeing a family wedding? Tyne Daly, who just concluded a successful run on Broadway as Diva Maria Callas in a revival of Terrence McNally's *Master Class* and has mastered many roles in her lauded career, is sheer Jewish joy as Judy Steinberg, the in-charge up-to-a-point mother of the bride. In spite of the tumult and turmoil that she has to contend with before, during and after the “I dos,” Judy is but one of the wonderful characters designated to make this musical a resounding pleasure from start to “Finale Ultimo.”

A splendid cast, under the breezy and accomplished direction of David Hyde Pierce (making his directorial debut) is certainly bringing out the very best in Hargrove's laugh-a-minute script and in the spirited, melodic score. You can expect that the initial plot device, in which the impending nuptials between the Jewish bride Rebecca (Jessica Hershberg) and the Catholic groom Brian (Matthew Hydzik) will inspire some humorously hostile bickering and bantering between Brian's snooty, bigoted parents Georgette (Harriet Harris) and George (Howard McGillin) and Rebecca's parents Judy and Murray (Richard Kline).

It's when Rebecca's ex boy-friend Marty (David Josefsberg) shows up that the plot really begins to percolate and the most fun begins when the wedding participants have to deal with secret agendas and lies that are suddenly exposed in one of the funniest Act 1 curtains I've ever seen. Act II, or should I say the whole affair, swings into high gear with a little extra help from Noah Racey's Jewish-wedding-ish choreography.

Each member of the top-drawer cast is afforded room to shine as well as being a part of the ensemble. Lisa Howard is terrific as Jenny, the musical's central character. She plays the bride's overweight, unmarried older sister who deals rather commendably with her mother's insensitivity, and her real feelings about (sorry can't say). Howard, who won a Drama Desk award for her performance in *The 25th*

Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, has a powerful voice and lets out her frustrations and stops the show at the top of Act II with the searing “Jenny’s Blues.”

Harriet Harris, a Tony and Drama Desk award-winner for *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, has never failed to give a spot-on comedic performance. She is a hoot as the over-sexed, mostly potted Georgette. She has the audience in stitches as she glides across the stage sitting on an upholstered rolling chair singing of her mistakes in raising Brian. Is there any actor in the world that can put on those sublime airs of superiority better than Edward Hibbert who is perfectly cast as Albert the wedding planner, a perfectionist whose motto “I live to serve” is constantly put to the challenge?

An excellent Richard Kline more than meets the challenge of being on stage with Daly, particularly when he says, “Your mother and I had words, but I didn’t get to use any of mine.” When it comes to words, Daly has two marvelous songs – “Nice” and “What They Never Tell You” to lyrically express her true feelings. McGillin (best known for his record-setting number of performances in the title role of *The Phantom of the Opera*) garners laughs with his awkward moments with his son (“I wanna be friends”) and as even more with his bawdy moments with Harris.

Tom Deckman gets a lot of comical mileage out his doubling as the wedding planner’s dubious young nephew/assistant Walt and as very old Uncle Morty. Also doubling for our pleasure is Mylinda Hull as Mildred and Aunt Sheila. Carla Duren is vivacious as bridesmaid Annie Sheps and Curtis Holbrook is splendid at proving that being the Best Man can have its perks.

Set designer Anna Louizos’s tasteful unit setting evoking the halls, doorways and suites of a posh New York Hotel is exactly the right background for the eye-popping attire by William Ivey Long. A quick look at the production credits, including those of outside producers Scott Landis, Michael Hanel and Daryl Roth, and you can see that they are hoping for big time with this show. Perhaps importantly, this musical is distinguished by the impressive collaboration of Hargrove and Anselmi.

While Hargrove has extensive TV credits, composer Anselmi worked on *It Shoulda Been You* as a member of the advanced BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop. The score has its pop resonances that also pay homage to Broadway tradition. From what I can recall, Hargrove lyrics (I was laughing too hard to write any down) are as clever and sharp as is his script. Far be it from me to say that *It Shoulda Been You* oughta be on Broadway before *Albert the wedding planner*, I mean Edward Hibbert, is offered another catered affair.

It Shoulda Been You was presented in the National Alliance for Musical Theatre’s Festival of New Musicals in 2009.