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Star-studded *'It Shoulda Been You'* sparkles in New Brunswick premiere

By Peter Filichia/For The Star-Ledger
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So many times, musicals have good first acts and lackluster second acts.

"It Shoulda Been You," enjoying its world premiere at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, avoids that fate.

After its very good first act, it has an even better second act.

Granted, this hit does have an agenda; act two may not please conservatives. The rest of the population, however, will roar with laughter and cheer with unmitigated approval.

To be sure, bookwriter-lyricist Brian Hargrove's setup seems overly familiar. There's the "Jewish girl marries Catholic boy" scenario. All four parents have myriad opinions about the wedding and the reception. Then there's the bride's old beau who shows up to stop the nuptials, as well as her single sister, who feels unloved.

All of these clichés get short-circuited, though, because Hargrove knows how to turn them upside down. Better still, every one of his twists is completely believable -- and hilarious.

One could complain at the end of act one that "It Shoulda Been You" seems like a musical sitcom. The jokes are high octane, but they still come across sounding like network TV at 8 p.m.

Not to worry. Hargrove reserves his second act for introducing plenty of heart, soul and feeling. Many theatergoers will be astounded that a gagfest has suddenly turned into a genuinely emotional experience. And while Barbara Anselmi's music may not win prizes, it serves Hargrove's lyrics well, and it is right for the characters.

Has a new musical trying out in New Jersey ever had such a stellar staff?

The direction is provided by David Hyde-Pierce, best-known as a Tony- and Emmy-winning actor. How nice to learn that he has yet another talent -- for the direction is slick. Two-plus hours zoom by at rocket speed. The director also gets the best out of newcomers Jessica Hershberg (the bride), Matthew Hydzik (the groom) and David Josefsberg (the ex-boyfriend).

Two Tony-winners splendidly play the mothers: Tyne ("Gypsy") Daly as Judy, the bride's mom, and Harriet ("Thoroughly Modern Millie") Harris as Georgette, representing the groom's side.

Actually, Judy could be unpleasant, considering how often and tartly she says what's on her mind. Daly ameliorates each zinger with her trademark smile, easily one of the most endearing in show business.

Harris portrays a dipsomaniac in maniacal fashion. No one will ever encounter a martini as dry as the way Harris delivers a joke. The suave Howard McGillin (of "Phantom of the Opera" fame) plays the husband who tries to glad-hand her. It's all to no avail -- although he fares better than Richard Kline does as Judy's husband. Kline battles Daly at every turn, letting an audience see that he knows he'll never win.

Also on hand is Edward Hibbert as the wedding planner. Few can match the jaunty way that Hibbert walks down a set of stairs. The deliberate way he takes a step at a time -- and sways his right arm in tempo -- is almost as funny as the joke he's delivering with perfect timing.

And yet, while the show sports big names, many theatergoers will leave George Street raving about the lesser-known Lisa Howard. As the sister who never gets to play the lead in any wedding, Howard shows good humor, resilience and excellent self-esteem. On opening night, no one else who sang a solo got the titanic applause that she did with her second-act aria.

Three New York producers are attached to this musical. Clearly, they're aiming for a longer run than the few weeks the show is on tap at George Street.

"Shoulda" should be a smash on Broadway.