

VARIETY

It Shoulda Been You

(George Street, New Brunswick, N.J.; 342 seats; \$78.50 top)

By Steven Suskin

October 17, 2011

A George Street Playhouse presentation of a musical in two acts with music and concept by Barbara Anselmi; lyrics and book by Brian Hargrove; additional lyrics by Jill Abramovitz, Carla Rose Fisher, Michael Cooper, Ernie Lijoi, Will Randall. Direction by David Hyde Pierce; choreography by Noah Racey. Music direction by Greg Anthony.

CAST

Jenny Steinberg - Lisa Howard

Walt/Uncle Morty - Tom Deckman

Mildred/Aunt Sheila - Mylinda Hull

Judy Steinberg - Tyne Daly

Murray Steinberg - Richard Kline

Rebecca Steinberg - Jessica Hershberg

Brian Howard - Matthew Hydzik

Greg Madison - Curtis Holbrook

Annie Sheps - Carla Duren

Albert - Edward Hibbert

Georgette Howard - Harriet Harris

George Howard - Howard McGillin

Marty Kaufman - David Josefsberg

Broadway comes to New Brunswick with the new musical comedy "It Shoulda Been You." The cast -- headed by Tyne Daly and Harriet Harris, with the likes of Howard McGillin and Edward Hibbert in support -- is impressive. Design team consists of top-level names Anna Louizos, William Ivey Long and Ken Billington. David Hyde Pierce makes what seems to be his directing debut, and producers Scott Landis, Michael Hanel and Daryl Roth are attached. With all this, "It Shoulda Been You" shoulda been good. The score is weak, though, and the book would have been a scream back in 1965.

What we have here is "Abie's Irish Rose" all over again. The fact that few people remember that long-running hit indicates just how past-dated "It Shoulda Been You" is; later sitcom models include "The Mothers-in-Law" and "Bridget Loves Bernie." Jewish girl weds Catholic boy, with the cliché-Jewish mama (Daly) pitted against the tiptling WASP mother (Harris); they even reprise those "Abie" jokes about the rabbi and the priest. This is "Love Boat" territory, all in all; but is there still an audience for "The Love Boat"? The authors eventually make things more contemporary, but one twist at the first act curtain and a rapid-and-funny final twenty minutes aren't enough.

Music comes from Barbara Anselmi, who also takes credit for the concept. The book is by TV-scribe Brian Hargrove; he also writes half the lyrics, with the rest coming from a committee of five receiving title-page credit. (That's a lot of writers for gems like "It shoulda been you, at least you're a Jew.") There are a very few reasonably effective songs along the way, but we have to wait until the final number for a good one, a quartet for the parents called "That's Family."

The actors go all out to make things enjoyable; each and every one of the 13 brightens the stage. Daly breezes through her role as the Jewish mother to end all Jewish mothers, although people who saw her in last season's "Master Class" know that she is capable of far more. Harris makes a perfect foil, and is wildly funny; so are McGillin and Richard Kline as the two husbands. Leading the pack and carrying the show is the little-known Lisa Howard -- a Drama Desk Award-winner for "The 25th Annual Putnam Valley Spelling Bee" -- as sister of the bride. When she sings a song, it gets sung. Hyde Pierce has his actors deliver the jokes effectively and has a knack for farcical staging, while choreographer Noah Racey makes do with his few opportunities.

Let it be noted that the George Street subscribers seem to be eating it up. The five-week run is a virtual sellout, but then they are getting Broadway stars and production values for low prices without making the hourlong drive into town and paying for parking. "It Shoulda Been You" should do fine with upper middle-class Jewish seniors -- there were convulsive shrieks all four times the bridegroom offered mangled Yiddish ("keena ahora") -- but this is a shrinking demographic.

How does such a slight entertainment as "It Shoulda Been You" get a gilt-edged, first-class mounting at a small regional like George Street? One guesses that Hyde Pierce, husband of lyricist/librettist Hargrove, pulled strings and called friends. The cast seems to be having a grand time, at least, and their clowning more than compensates for the weary writing.

Set, Anna Louizos; costumes, William Ivey Long; lighting, Ken Billington; sound, Acme Sound Partners; orchestrations, Doug Besterman; production stage manager, Thomas Clewell. Opened Oct. 14, 2011, reviewed Oct. 16, closes Nov. 6. Running time: 2 HOURS.

Musical numbers: "I Never Wanted This," "This Day," "Perfect," "It Shoulda Been You," "Who," "Nice," "Where Did I Go Wrong?" "Beautiful," "Albert's Song," "A Perfect Ending to a Beautiful Beginning," "Love You Till the Day," "Jenny's Blues," "Whatever," "A Little Bit Less Than," "What They Never Tell You," "That's Family"