

# 'Gypsy' comes up a winner at Chicago Shakespeare

## Superb cast propels dazzling musical

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“Gypsy” is a musical about people who are desperate to be seen and heard. And of course where better to live out that dream of recognition than on the stage of a theater? Of course those in search of real love would prefer a home.



Director Gary Griffin’s altogether enthralling Chicago Shakespeare Theatre production of the Jule Styne-Stephen Sondheim-Arthur Laurents Broadway classic makes all this clearer, more real and less shrill than in any of the countless versions of this show I’ve seen over the years. And with the astonishing Louise Pitre starring as Mama Rose — the original “tiger mom,” and a human engine that cannot be shut down — he has tapped an actress capable of making the hunger to be noticed, and the relentless pursuit of a dream that hunger sets in motion, feel every bit as pitiable as cruel and destructive.

But that is only the beginning. Every element of this marvelously detailed, ideally cast production bursts with intelligence, emotional heat and truth. The storytelling, which moves through the Depression years and the decline of the American vaudeville circuit, is superb. And the combined genius of Styne’s glorious music and Sondheim’s lyrics (scenes in and of themselves), makes you wonder why the two men did not continue to collaborate.

The magic here begins from the moment you enter the theater and feel the golden embrace of de- signer Kevin Depinet’s magnificent arabesque of a proscenium arch. The beauty of the set captures the gilded spirit of the show biz world that so clearly has entranced Rose. And then it all comes alive as the exceptional 14-piece orchestra, perched above the stage, and led by Valerie Maze, blazes forth with an overture bursting with the show’s many irresistible songs: “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” “Small World,” “You’ll Never Get Away from Me,” “Let Me Entertain You” and more. It is a lush prelude to the story of a woman who has failed at marriage three times and spends her life channeling her own thwarted drives into her two daughters — June (Erin Burniston) and Louise (Jessica Rush) — both of whom must eventually declare their independence. Along the way, Rose also will lose the one man who understands, accepts and loves her most — the utterly decent salesman-turned-agent, Herbie (Keith Kupferer in an immensely winning performance of great warmth).

Pitre, petite and graceful, with the somewhat worn face of “a pioneer woman without a frontier” (as Herbie describes her), and an intriguing voice lined with a slight raspiness, is remark-

able in her ability to move seamlessly from scene to song. And when it comes time for her great, angry confession/tirade, "Rose's Turn," she is volcanic.

As Louise, her gangly, sensitive daughter — the girl with no show biz dreams at all, who suprisingly blossoms into Gypsy Rose Lee, that classiest of burlesque stars — Rush manages a delicious transformation, deftly hiding her leggy allure til the very last minute. Her poignant scenes with a dancer, Tulsa (Rhett Guter, who enchants in "All I Need is the Girl"), and her wideeyed fascination with the hardcore strippers (the hilarious Barbara E. Robertson, Molly Callinan and Rengin Altay) are charming. But it must be said she is nearly upstaged by a lamb who deserves an acting award all its own.

Rick Fox's music direction, Mitzi Hamilton's choreography and Virgil Johnson's inspired costumes all add to the magic here. Were this "Gypsy" not part of a subscription series it could easily run for years.