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ARTS | CONNECTICUT; The Irrepressible Auntie

By SYLVIANE GOLD
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Louise Pitre knows how to punch home a song. Starring as the irrepressible title character in "Mame" at the Goodspeed Opera House, she lends a fierce energy to the snazzy choreography by Vince Pesce and the efficient book scenes of Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. But it's not until everyone else departs and she's left alone on James Youmans's stylish set to sing the show's rueful, climactic Jerry Herman ballad, "If He Walked Into My Life," that this production comes fully into its own.

That's a little late. But Ms. Pitre is not to blame. Neither is the show's director, Ray Roderick. He has proved in the past that he knows his way around old musicals, as well as the tight confines of the Goodspeed's East Haddam playing space. The fact is that despite having a beloved heroine, a popular score and a time frame that spans nearly 20 years (from 1928 to 1946), "Mame" doesn't really get moving until the title number brings the curtain down on the first act.

By then, we've long since grasped the essentials of the story, which first caught the public imagination in Patrick Dennis's 1955 best-selling novel, "Auntie Mame," and then went on to even greater glory as a stage and film vehicle for Rosalind Russell. Like its predecessors, the musical version follows the exploits of the madcap title character as she contends with the addition of her newly orphaned 10-year-old nephew, Patrick (at Goodspeed, the apple-cheeked Eli Baker) to her jazz-and-Champagne household on Beekman Place. Also around are her cocktail-swilling actress friend, Vera Charles (the tartly supercilious Judy Blazer); the spinsterish nanny, Agnes Gooch (the winning Kirsten Wyatt); and the strait-laced bank trustee, Mr. Babcock (Paul Carlin, oozing disapproval).

The first act gives us three of her life-is-a-banquet anthems -- "It's Today," "Open a New Window" and "We Need a Little Christmas" -- when one would easily suffice. We also have to sit through an intentionally bad chestnut from a comic operetta scene -- "The Moon Song" -- when none would have been preferable. While Act II offers more dramatic action, as well as Ms. Pitre's powerful solo turn, it's punctuated with reprises and ends exactly the way Act I does.

By all reports, these structural flaws were rendered invisible back in 1966, when Angela Lansbury's blazing performance won her a Tony and eternal stardom. (I'm not convinced that would happen if she walked into the show today.) Ms. Pitre, who earned Broadway bona fides with her Tony-nominated Donna Sheridan in "Mamma Mia," may not quite match Ms. Lansbury's innate glamour. But she works tirelessly to fill in the cracks in the show, as do the superb ensemble and the other principal cast members -- James Lloyd Reynolds, switching from the gruff director of Goodspeed's "42nd Street" a few years back to the genial oilman Mame marries, and Charles Hagerty, who makes an appealing adult Patrick, deserve mention.

The cast is well-served by Gregg Barnes's detailed costuming -- note the mittens dangling from young Patrick's coat sleeves -- and Charlie Morrison's expert lighting scheme, which makes the most of all those bespangled chemises and keeps up with Mr. Pesce's fast-paced Charlestons and jitterbugs, not to mention the sedately silly Connecticut dance "craze," the Darien Dip.

Connecticut, alas, comes in for quite a drubbing in "Mame." It's the home of the grown-up Patrick's fatuous, snobby girlfriend, and her crass parents, who proudly announce that they live in "the most restricted community" in their part of the state. Synonymous with everything conventional, hidebound and bigoted in American life, the place is the exact opposite of the bohemian, freewheeling and tolerant Mame. It's safe to say that Connecticut has changed since Mame's day, even if "Mame" itself has not.

"Mame," by Jerry Herman (music and lyrics) and Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (book), is at the Goodspeed Opera House, 6 Main Street, East Haddam, through July 7. Information at 860-873-8668 or www.goodspeed.org.

PHOTOS: MADCAP HEROINE: Louise Pitre, near left and at right, steps into the title role of "Mame" -- made famous by Angela Lansbury in 1966 -- at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam and lends a fierce energy to the songs and choreography of a familiar story line. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIANE SOBOLEWSKI)

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