

Theater Review: *Gypsy*
By Julie Stern
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Rainy weather delayed our getting to see Musicals at Richter's production of *Gypsy* until the middle weekend of the run, which is a shame because it is such a good production of a show that has far more depth than that other bio-musical, *Funny Girl*. Based on the memoir of Gypsy Rose Lee, the famed Minsky's burlesque artiste, (who was in turn immortalized in the musical *Pal Joey* by the song about the intellectual stripper- "*Zip- I was reading Schopenhauer last night, Zip- and I think that Schopenhauer was right...*") *Gypsy* is above all a portrait of a pathological stage mother who was driven by her own unfulfilled dreams to push her daughters into a twisted odyssey along a dying vaudeville circuit.

Determined to make her younger daughter, June, into a star along the lines of Shirley Temple, Rose Thompson forces June and her older sister, Louise, into a Procrustean state of perpetual pretend childhood. Taking them out of school, forging birth certificates and dressing them as dolls to make them look younger, she designs vaudeville acts centered around "Baby June" and criss-crosses the country, trying to book them into theaters.

The time is the Great Depression, and there are always other poor children available to be dragooned into supporting roles, each seeming to fulfill Rose's latest vision of success, just around the corner. Baby June and the Newsboys, Baby June and the Farmer boys, Baby June and the Hollywood Blondes... Rose can never afford to pay them; they sleep two to a bed in ratty rooming houses, and share cheap Chinese food, but she is so determined, that for years they go along with it.

So does Herbie, the candy salesman who loves Rose enough to become her agent and enable her crazed plans. It is only when June, in her childish blonde wig, declares she has had enough, and rebels against her mother by running off with one of the boy dancers, that Rose turns her attention to Louise. Until then, Louise, the shy, awkward, introverted poet, was always dressed as a boy, and relegated to a minor role.

Having lost June (who in real life went on to become the movie actress June Havoc) Rose tries to build a new act around Louise. Desperate to please Rose, Herbie books them into what he thought was a legitimate theater, but which turns out to be a burlesque palace, in which the performers go on stage to strip. For a moment, Rose is outraged. But, realizing that vaudeville is dead, and burlesque has taken its place, she is able to adjust and push her remaining daughter to try it. After all, she will be a star...

For the show to work, it needs a strong talent for the part of Rose. Happily, Richter has a powerful presence in Martha Lerman, who not only belts out the eight most memorable songs in the Jule Styne-Stephen Sondheim score, but also projects a personality charismatic enough to win the devotion of Herbie and the children, despite her monstrous manipulations.

Rose Bisogno as June, and Megan Corcoran as Louise, do a fine job. It takes considerable talent to portray bad acting and singing, when it is clear that they really could be good. Damian Long is very

effective as the kind-hearted, mild-mannered Herbie, whose rage and frustration at Rose's behavior are channeled inward, giving him a perpetual upset stomach.

There is lots of lively dancing by the kids in the supporting roles, and a wonderful funny turn by Jorie Janeway, Lauryn Linley, and Jody Bayer as the veteran strippers who explain the ropes to wide-eyed Louise. [Names to be corrected for print]

This is one of the few musicals I had never seen before, and I didn't know what to expect. As it turned out, I enjoyed it hugely, and my thirteen-year-old granddaughter *loved* it, especially the fact that there were so many kids in the show, doing such a good job. If you have any free moments on the weekend of the Fourth, this would be a great evening out, under the stars.