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# Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## When Silent Was Golden

'The First Picture Show' has the same try-anything spirit as its early-Hollywood subject. But why does it feel so unformed?

### Theater Review

By MICHAEL PHILLIPS  
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

**A**mbitious, fluidly staged, "The First Picture Show" wants it all. The show's makers—librettists and lyricists Ain Gordon and David Gordon, and composer Jeanine Tesori, whose evocative score is played on two pianos, silent movie-style—tell their stories of early Hollywood in the expansive, try-anything spirit of their subject.

That subject is a fictional female silent movie director, Anne First, working in the ragged but golden era before consolidation forced small studios out of business. During that time, more women managed to wear more movie-making hats than the mainline history books would suggest. "The First Picture Show" pays tribute to those pioneers,

while dealing on the fly with issues of censorship, prejudice, racism, hypocrisy and ruthless commercial pressures. (All of which, thankfully, have left the film industry by now.)

This near-musical, now at the Mark Taper Forum after its world premiere in San Francisco, offers a lot. It's cleverly mounted. Everything on scenic designer Robert Brill's soundstage setting is on wheels, pushed around by the 14-person ensemble. Director-choreographer David Gordon generates a constant but discerning swirl of movement, shifting the action on a dime. At its best, the staging deploys silent film techniques—title cards locating the action, deliberately out-of-tune piano underscoring—in ways that work theatrically.

When it's clicking, this investigation of unsung heroines behind the camera makes a virtue of its layered storytelling, its at-

**Please see 'Picture Show,' F27**



PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times

Ellen Greene, left, and Estelle Parsons in "The First Picture Show."



## 'Picture Show'

Continued from F1

tempt to blend history with domestic drama, in two time periods, no less. Other times, it's as if the show's primary streams were disconnected from their many tributaries.

"The First Picture Show" has foremost on its mind the story of a movie-mad sister and brother. Anne Furstmann (Ellen Greene, winning and in swell voice) leaves brother Louie (Steven Skybell) and Louie's scowling wife (Norma Fire) behind in Ohio for a crack at the movies. Furstmann becomes Fl'st, and goes to work for producer Carl Laemmle (Ken Marks, playing one of the show's many real-life characters). She joins a group of female movie-making colleagues, creating socially conscious movies alongside the usual serial fodder. Later Louie and his wife join Anne, only to have personal and political forces divide the family.

History isn't linear, as one character says, and neither is "The First Picture Show." After a few introductory turn-of-the-century scenes, the Gordons zing us abruptly into the mid-1990s, where we catch up with the now elderly Anne First (Estelle Parsons, effectively if ruthlessly cute). She has ended up in a retirement home for motion picture folks, surrounded by cronies, all of whom (nice touch) claim to have appeared in D.W. Griffith's "Intolerance."

Anne receives an unexpected visitor from her great-grand-niece, Jane Furstmann (Greene again, in a role she has taken on since the San Francisco premiere). A burned-out director of TV commercials, Furstmann has discovered long-lost Louie's diary, full of tantalizing reports of early Hollywood and the family Furstmann didn't know she had. As Furstmann draws out the cranky, reluctant Anne, we see Anne's earlier years unfold on stage.

It's good to see Greene and Parsons mix it up, even if these latter-day scenes as written feel more functional than inspired. There is, however, an especially strong vignette set in the retirement home, wherein Jane interviews an aged African American filmmaker (Harry Waters Jr., eloquent in a role based loosely on director Oscar Micheaux). In a few succinct memories, a lifetime of accomplishment and frustration comes alive.



PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times

A silent movie-style frame accents a scene featuring Steven Skybell and Norma Fire in "The First Picture Show" at the Mark Taper Forum.

In the silent era material, "The First Picture Show" sometimes falls prey to halcyon generalities. We don't get much sense of what First and her real-life counterparts had to put up with; her on-set improvisations resemble outtakes from an idealized movie-making summer camp. And some of the Gordons' lyrics settle for what must be termed "feminism for idiots."

This tantalizing if unformed project has too vital a subject, or subjects, for mere nostalgia. Occasionally wonderful and never dull, "The First Picture Show" lacks a certain urgency in its storytelling. Deliberately, perhaps. We're watching memories as recalled by a 99-year-old looking back a long way. Yet those memories could use some sharpening, so that we feel more fully the energy of that time—just before, as the elder Anne says, the "little studios where big things happened became big studios where little things happened."

• "The First Picture Show," Mark Taper Forum, Music Center of Los Angeles County, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown L.A. Tuesdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2:30 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Ends Sept. 18. \$29-\$40. (213) 628-2772. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.

Estelle Parsons..... Anne First age 99  
(played Sept. 7-12 by Anne Gee Byrd)

Christian Nova.... Censor, Customs official, others  
Chuck Rosen.... Louie's mother, newsman, others  
Kathleen Conry... Lois Weber, Thelma March  
Ellen Greene..... Anne First ages 15-38, Jane Furstmann  
Norma Fire..... May Furstmann, Connie Gardner, Gene Gauntier  
Harry Waters Jr.... Censor, Percy Waters, others  
Steven Skybell.... Louis Furstmann, Henry Hooks, others  
Jeanne Sakata... Nurse Tina, Cindy Su, others  
Karen Graham..... Louie's friend, Nell Shipman, others  
Ken Marks..... Carl Laemmle, Billy Friend, others  
Valda Setterfield.... Rev. Wilbur F. Crafts, Alice Guy Blaché, others  
Kerry K. Carnahan..... TV newscaster, movie crew  
Kimberly Grigsby... Naomi the piano player

Book and lyrics by Ain Gordon and David Gordon. Music by Jeanine Tesori. Directed and choreographed by David Gordon. Set by Robert Brill. Costumes by Judith Dolan. Lighting by Jennifer Tipton. Sound by Jon Gottlieb and Philip G. Allen. Music director Kimberly Grigsby. Production stage manager Ed Fitzgerald.