

## Theater review

## 'The First Picture Show'

Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles  
Through Sept. 18

By Ed Kaufman

Using the lure and myth of showbiz as their premise, writers Ain and David Gordon (also book, lyrics and direction) and Jeanine Tesori (music) have created "The First Picture Show," a warm, sly tribute to 100 years of Hollywood, especially to the trailblazing women of the industry before the advent of talkies and the studio mergers.

Somehow, while the rest of the country was wrestling with women's right to vote, Hollywood was flush with talented, dedicated female filmmakers such as Gene Gauntier, Alice Guy Blanche, Helen Gardner, Lois Weber, Cleo Madison and Dorothy Davenport.

The Gordons have taken the facts and woven in a fictional part for their story: the tale of Anne First. She's played at age 99 by the



*Estelle Parsons is a 99-year-old filmmaker with a haunting past.*

wonderful, cantankerous Estelle Parsons and at ages 15-38 by the equally brilliant Ellen Greene.

Obsessed with the movies ("my lover, brother and best friend"), First, formerly Furstmann, leaves

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## 'Picture'

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the Ohio home of her brother Louis (Steven Skybell) and sister-in-law May (Norma Fire) at age 15 and never looks back.

Cut to 1995 at the Motion Picture Retirement Home. Here, 38-year-old documentary filmmaker Jane Furstmann (also played by Greene) arrives to film some early filmmakers including her great aunt Anne First, who's still bitchy and now confined to a wheelchair. Anne claims not to remember the old days, but we see that she is haunted by the past and agonizingly relives it every day.

As the saga unfolds, the Gordons give us a factual and political picture of America over those years: a picture of censorship, Supreme Court decisions, the closing of smaller independents and the corporate takeover of studios.

Sound familiar?

## THE FIRST PICTURE SHOW

Presented by the Center Theatre  
Group/Music Center of Los Angeles  
and American Conservatory Theater  
in association with AT&T: OnStage

Book and lyrics ... Ain Gordon and David Gordon  
Music ... Jeanine Tesori  
Director-choreographer ... David Gordon  
Associate director ... Ain Gordon  
Sets ... Robert Brill  
Costumes ... Judith Dolan  
Lighting ... Jennifer Tipton  
Sound ... Jon Gottlieb and Philip G. Allen  
Music director ... Kimberly Grigsby

## Cast:

Anne First (age 99) ... Estelle Parsons  
Anne First (ages 15-38), Jane Furstmann ... Ellen Greene  
May Furstmann, Connie Gardner,  
Gene Gauntie ... Norma Fire  
Louis Furstmann, Henry Hooks,  
Monty Latour ... Steven Skybell  
Carl Laemmle, Ad-man, Billy Friend,  
Ida May Park ... Ken Marks  
Rev. Wilbur F. Crafts, Alice Guy Blache, Awards  
Host ... Valda Setterfield  
Naomi the Piano Player ... Kimberly Grigsby  
Also: Christian Nova, Chuck Rosen, Kathleen  
Conry, Harry Waters Jr., Jeanne Sakata, Karen  
Graham, Kerry K. Carnahan

The play benefits from strong, savvy stage support from Kerry K. Carnahan, Kathleen Conry, Ken Marks, Karen Graham, Christian Nova, Valda Setterfield, Chuck Rosen, Harry Waters Jr. and Jeanne Sataka in a variety of roles. □