

Contra Costa

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PERFORMANCE

'First' puts early film at center stage

■ Musical about the dawn of the movies draws parallels to modern times and provides enlightenment about a forgotten era

By Pat Craig
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In a joyous blending of cinematic effects and theatricality, "The First Picture Show" flickers into ACT's Geary Theater as a captivating musical that makes the medium every bit as much a part of the message as the message itself.

The stylish show makes its world premiere on a lively but bare-bones set that is in an almost constant state of motion, and tells forgotten tales of the first decade or three of the movies. It is this style, this constantly restless movement, change and energy, that delivers the message of film's early years, as much as the script does.

Back then, at the beginning, there were women, plenty of them, in the production end of movies, and minority film companies making movies for their own audiences. And there was censorship — the oppressive blanket of fear that tried to smother the relentless onslaught of progress.

In short, there seems to be too much political edge here for an evening's musical entertainment.

But, entertain it does, with "The First Picture Show" blending an epic-length array of rarely combined theatrical components to give the piece a feel that is both fresh and familiar.

Particularly fascinating is the way authors Aln and David Gordon (a father and son team) have collaborated with composer Jeanine Tesori to make music and song a vital and almost seamless part of the show's dramatic arc. Songs throughout the show, nearly 30 of them, are not necessarily cause for dancing and kick lines; instead, most of the music and lyrics are used to add depth and dimension to the characters, and often tunes are performed more as introspective monologues than show-stoppers. This whole rethinking of music in theater becomes a powerful storytelling tool.

The stylized musical play (the creative crew has taken to calling it a physical) revolves loosely around the journey of documentary filmmaker Jane Furstmann (Dinah Lenney), who has discovered the diary of her great-grandfather Louis Furstmann (Evan Pappas) that tells the tale of her Great Aunt Anne First (Anne Gee Byrd, at age 99, and Ellen Greene, at ages 15-38) and her pioneering work in early Hollywood moviemaking.

Her decision to create a documentary about her great aunt, and others whose work was lost to history ("A lot of things happen," one character says, "and someone decides which ones become history"), launches a wild ride back and forth through time to look at Jane's interviews with surviving, but unrec-



DINAH LENNEY plays an inquisitive relative whose questions and conclusions guide the story line.

THEATER REVIEW

■ **WHAT:** American Conservatory Theater's production of "The First Picture Show," by Aln Gordon, David Gordon and Jeanine Tesori.
■ **WHERE:** Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., S.F.
■ **WHEN:** 8 p.m. Tuesday, Saturday and 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through June 6.
■ **HOW MUCH:** \$19-\$65.
■ **CALL:** 415-749-2228 or 202-BASS

ognized, film pioneers (in this case, primarily women and minorities), her own personal relationships, and the uneasy affection that develops between her and Aunt Annie, a feisty, fiery and occasionally protean Byrd, who, through sheer force of character, is the foundation upon which the piece is built).

As those living in the rest home (all of whom, it seems, have roots in the early decades of movies) begin talking, stories emerge about their pioneering work that has gone basically unrecognized and the almost criminal disregard history has had for the dawn of the movies, and the incredible parallels between the early years of film, and the early years of the World Wide Web — the time we are moving through right now.

Throughout the show, real characters rub shoulders with fictional creations to tell the story and move through the exciting early years of film, when everything was new and innovation happened every time someone flicked on the lights and cranked up the camera. It's just that now, sorting things out, the people who really did the innovating may not have gotten the credit they deserve.

That sort of reasoning, solid as it is on the surface, is really the only problem the play has. In telling the story, the authors seem intent on creating some sort of enemy where none really existed. Those who were left behind by the onslaught of film history seem to be more the victims of chance and circumstance than anything more insidious. And really, even without some sort of institutional bogeyman, the story would be just as effective and much less didactic (somehow the authors feel the



ANNE GEE BYRD and Ellen Greene both portray Anne First, movie pioneer, in "The First Picture Show."

need to occasionally have one character or another hop up into the pulpit to deliver a little PC sermon — a mallet approach that does little to

help the show).

In the main, though, "The First Picture Show" is a delight that not only offers entertaining insight on

an area of film history that is not very well-known, but also expands the language of musical theater. It should have a healthy life well