

Eras Intersect in 'Picture Show'

Musical about silent film doesn't sing

By Steven Winn
CHRONICLE STAFF CRITIC

The American musical has always loved the exhilarating agonies of show business. From "Show Boat" to "Dreamgirls," "Cabaret" to "A Chorus Line," art exacts a harsh yet redemptive price from the play's characters.

"The First Picture Show" made a tantalizing, unfulfilled entry into the field Wednesday at the Geary Theater. The American Conservatory Theater is co-producing this world premiere musical with Los Angeles' Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

Ain and David Gordon's book unearths the little-known true stories of female film directors who flourished during the silent era and vanished thereafter. That history is filtered through a fictional frame that raises meaningful questions about success and failure, women in the arts and free expression in American culture. The music, by Jeanine Tesori, invokes a bittersweet air of yearning and regret, with two pia-

THE FIRST PICTURE SHOW Musical. Book and lyrics by Ain Gordon and David Gordon. Music by Jeanine Tesori. Directed by David Gordon. (Through June 6. At the Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$14-\$55. Call (415) 749-2228.)

nos and nothing more at her disposal.

But the show works only in fits and starts. This "Picture Show" interests and educates without engag-

ing the audience very deeply. Despite some witty and affecting touches, director/choreographer David Gordon's production never shakes off its dutiful fussiness to make us experience the characters and their concerns in an immediate way.

With a film studio sound stage as the common ground set, the story unites two fictional directors from different eras. Dinah Lenney plays Jane Furstmann, a contemporary

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Dinah Lenney peruses family diaries in "The First Picture Show."

Forgotten Women of Silent Film

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documentary filmmaker in search of a subject. She finds it in her great-great aunt Anne First, whom she discovers through a family diary and then in person at a retirement home in Los Angeles.

Anne Cee Byrd portrays Anne as the cranky 99-year-old in a wheelchair — she looks a lot closer to 69. Ellen Greene plays the eager Ohio girl who moved to California, directed her first film at age 19 and never looked back until the talkies came in and her career ended.

Time slips around as easily as the rolling steps, door frames and other furnishings on Robert Brill's set. As Jane pursues her research, Anne's career comes flickering back to life. Cast members carry silent movie title cards to place and comment on the action.

Gordon, who previously directed "Sholem! the First" here, keeps his cast of 14 incessantly occupied on the dreary black-and-gray set, quick-cutting from retirement home to 1920s Hollywood, modern airport gates to 19th century small-town Ohio. "Ragtime"-fashion, real life characters and events are spliced into the dual fictional narratives.

Pioneer female filmmakers Alice Guy Blache, Lois Weber, Marion E. Wong and others — some of them played by men — supply a kind of choral punctuation to Anne's story. There's crusty producer Carl Laemmle, a crusading censor, a Supreme Court justice and a pragmatic senator.

The Gordons' book fills in a lot of Hollywood history efficiently, if a bit prosaically. Anne exults in her first payday ("I made five dollars!") and begins to direct with a certain flair for suggesting subversive human motives beneath the broad conventions of silent films. The censors come down for "benign delight."

Tesori limns the story with floating songs that hint at antique waltzes and parlor ballads shaded with modern dissonance. Harry Waters Jr., as an aged black producer, sings an aching, murmurous lament to close the first act.



Evan Pappas (Monty Latour) and the ensemble cast in "The First Picture Show," the world premiere musical ACT is co-producing, at Geary Theater.

So much of it seems like wheel-spinning, however, as neither of the main characters takes on much substance or specificity. The theatrical possibilities of mingling past and present go largely unrealized.

It's not until well into the first act that a musical number, "Where Am I in This?" emphatically joins the two halves of the show. Jane's husband Ben (Waters) and Anne's sister-in-law May (a tartly understated Norma Fire) muse on getting lost in their respective families' film obsessions.

"Picture Show" moves to make some stronger, deeper connections in the second act. Jane and Anne reveal a rivalry that's unconvincing but strikingly expressed in song. The younger Anne and her brother Louie (the solid Evan Pappas) fall out over their conflicting ambitions.

In a complex scene set at a Senate hearing on movie censorship, the characters' feelings spill out with a Sondheimian profusion and ardor. "I found history still breathing," Jane sings, finally stirring to life as a character. The scene fizzles, but there's a sense here, at last, of what this "Picture Show" quest is all about.

Later on, as Anne's career comes to an abrupt close, she spools slowly out of view in one of Gordon's most telling images, hauntingly lit by Jennifer Tipton. Then Anne as an old woman reviews her life in the unspooling "Who Stopped Loving Who First?"

"The First Picture Show" pays honorable tribute to these forgotten women. But too much of it happens at a respectful distance. The show lacks the strong emotional identification, until very late, that offers a way in for the audience.

Groene, the enchanting innocent in "Little Shop of Horrors," isn't the only talent underused here. From Tesori's lovely fragments to a few solid performances, this "Picture Show" offers beguiling glimpses into its world but never quite fills the frame.

DATEBOOK

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