

THE FEMALE FOCUS

ACT's 'First Picture Show' tells story of women who directed early films

By Mick LaSalle
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In the beginning, there were lots of women in the movie business. Not just stars. Not just screenwriters. These were women who wrote, produced, photographed, directed, edited and distributed their own movies. We're not talking about just two or three women, but many. The business was wide open, and any woman with a camera and a story to tell could jump right in.

Few people remember or are aware of this aspect of movie history, but now there's a new musical to remind them. "The First Picture Show," which opens at the Geary Theater on Wednesday, taps into the stories and the vitality of this rich era. It takes audiences back to the early years of the century, when movies were so new that a film of a train coming into a station was enough to excite viewers — and a close-up was the most enthralling sight in the world.

"The close-up was a terrifying idea," says Ain Gordon, who co-wrote the book and the lyrics with his father, David Gordon. "People thought that the size and visceral nature of the close-up would overwhelm anyone's moral impulses. There was something so lifelike, so true, to have something of that size in front of you, that people thought it was dangerous."

It's the afternoon, during a break in rehearsal at the American Conservatory Theater, and the creators of "The First Picture Show" are talking about how their musical came to be. The journey began 3½ years ago with a conversation at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, when Artistic Director Gordon Davidson asked the Gordons what they wanted to do for their next project.

"Because we were in L.A. and all the movie spaces were there, we'd been talking about silent movies a lot," says David Gordon, who is directing the show.

'THE FIRST PICTURE SHOW'

The musical is in previews, opens at 8 p.m. Wednesday and runs through June 6 at the Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$11-\$55. Call (415) 749-2228.



JOHN O'HARA / The Chronicle

Jeanine Tesori wrote the music for "The First Picture Show," whose book and lyrics were written by Ain (left) and David Gordon.

"I love to watch old movies," says Ain Gordon. "I know much less about silent movies, so for me it was a more foreign, exotic place to go looking. There's something very haunting about L.A., with all the relics of this pioneering movement — movies were the last big pioneering movement before computers. We talked a bit about telling the story of early Hollywood through the eyes of a fictional 99-year-old director who was there from the beginning.

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AIN GORDON
on the inspiration for "The First Picture Show"

directed, who ran their own studios, all of them forgotten. So I called on a pay phone and said, 'It's not a man! It's a woman!'"

The fictional heroine is 99-year-old Anne First, a pioneer filmmaker living in a retirement home. Her great-niece Jane, also a filmmaker, enters Anne's life to make a documentary about Anne and other female directors of her time. One scene flows into the next as the narrative goes from the modern era to the early days of cinema. The old Anne is played by Anne Gee Byrd, and young Anne (ages 15 through 38) is played by Ellen Greene.

The Gordons talk with great enthusiasm about the pioneer days of the film industry. Over the course of writing the show, they've had to become experts. "These men have lived this," says composer Jeanine Tesori of her collaborators. "It's really in them on a cellular level — in their passion."

Tesori came on board late in the game, after seeing a staged reading in New York. By then, "The First Picture Show" had lined up the ACT and Taper engagements. "The theme didn't interest me until I saw it, and then I loved it," Tesori says. "The writing was already musical — it had this incredible rhythm. They'd created a world I'd never seen in the theater."

Tesori scored the show for two pianos, one out of tune. The untuned piano creates the sense of an old rehearsal hall.

The Gordons and Tesori have been determined not to impose an artificial social agenda on the musical — namely, the idea that it was an anti-feminist backlash that resulted in female directors fading in the '20s. "In fact, there is no particular reason the women disappeared," David Gordon says. "Things were changing. They weren't the new faces anymore. Some of them were getting married. Some were having children. Some were getting divorced and taking their children with them. The industry was shrinking down. In the case of the director Lois Weber, she made morality tales, but after World War I those films weren't popular anymore. So she disappeared."

But one parallel between today and yesterday, which the writers intuited from the beginning, was borne out in their research: the connection between the early effort to censor motion pictures and the move today to limit access to the Internet.

"Here was a freedom of information that could be achieved by anyone with a camera," David Gordon says. "So right from the beginning there were attempts to stop people from getting to all parts of it, to stop certain age groups from being able to use it, to stop certain things from being on it. Which is the same thing that's happening today."

All the same, the Gordons and Tesori say they've strived to present the concerns of the censors with respect and without judgment. "Each party back then obviously believed that they were doing what was necessary," Tesori says. "Music naturally has an emotional underpinning, but in this show we try to present what the characters thought, not what the authors think."