

FRIDAY, May 14, 1999

THE OAKLAND TRIBUNE

Silent movies unfocused in lively 'Show' by ACT

By Chad Jones
STAFF WRITER

THERE'S a tremendous amount of love and talent on display in "The First Picture Show," an ambitious new musical about the silent film era.

The talent stretches from the hard-working cast to the inventive production team. The love is for movies, especially for the long-forgotten women directors who helped pioneer the art of cinema.

"The First Picture Show" had its world premiere Wednesday at the American Conservatory Theater's Geary Theater in San

THEATER REVIEW

**"The First Picture Show" by David Gordon, Aln Gordon and Jeanine Tesori
★★½ Muddled movie memories**

Francisco, and its promise shone through its faults.

Like many new musical theater projects, this one is full of great moments and moving performances, but it still needs a great deal of work to develop the

Please see **Show**, CUE-8



Anne First (Anne Gee Byrd, right) listens to herself as a teen-ager (Ellen Greene) during a performance of "The First Picture Show."

ROD A. LAMKEY JR. — Staff

Show: It needs to relax its standards and let the audience in

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musical numbers more fully and to focus its rambling, often overreaching scope.

Director/writers David Gordon and Aln Gordon, a father and son team, and composer Jeanine Tesori have crammed so much fact and fiction into the show's 2½ hours that the evening feels twice as long as it really is. Their fast-paced staging is a never-ending whirl of characters, tidbits of songs and scenes set both in the mid-'90s and in the early part of this century.

What the show does well is capture the excitement of film in its earliest days. A whole world of opportunity was opening up for anyone with a dream to change the world and for anyone with the urge to make a fast buck.

The plot centers around a fictional woman filmmaker, Anne First, who was part of a large group of now-forgotten women who wrote, produced, directed and even starred in silent

IF YOU GO

"The First Picture Show"
by David Gordon, Aln Gordon and Jeanine Tesori

■ **Presented by:** American Conservatory Theater

■ **Where:** Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays (except 7 p.m. May 18), 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays with additional 2 p.m. matinees on May 26 and June 2; closes June 6

■ **Tickets:** \$14-\$46

■ **Transit:** Powell Street BART

■ **Call:** (415) 749-2228

movies. We meet Anne as an ambitious 15-year-old in Ohio and also as a 99-year-old patient in a retirement home for show biz folk.

As Anne is interviewed by her

great-great-niece, also a filmmaker, she re-lives the best and worst of her 20-year film career. In addition to Anne's story, we get a condensed but detailed account of silent film history that mixes fictional characters with real-life ones, a treatise on the evils of censorship, a glimpse into the plight of early black filmmakers and an underdeveloped trio of love stories.

Robert Brill's mostly bare stage resembles a film sound stage, and the actors wheel their props on and off the stage with amazing speed and fluidity. But by the play's end, all the activity gets wearying. In fact, several notable devices grow old quickly, especially the silent film-type placards that actors hold up to identify characters and offer humorous commentary.

The ensemble is uniformly excellent, with standout performances coming from Ellen Greene (Audrey in "Little Shop of Horrors" on stage and in film) as the young Anne and Anne Gee Byrd as the feisty old

Anne.

Also strong are Evan Pappas in a variety of roles and Harry Waters Jr., who has a moving number as a black director with a story to tell.

Theater about movies is risky business. The best medium for a discussion about film is film itself. The Gordons understand this, and though they stoop to using actual movies on stage, they do so with a theatrical flair that never undermines or overshadows the live actors.

This is especially true in the show's poignant epilogue, when the past and the present, real life and celluloid come together in a powerful way. The only thing missing from this finale is music.

The use of songs and music in "The First Picture Show" is odd. In many ways, this is a play with music, but it feels like it wants to be a real musical, that is, a musical in which actors let loose with songs that have a beginning, a middle and an end. The songs crafted by the Gordons and Tesori are ap-

pealing, but they're mostly beginnings and middles. No ends.

As a musical, this show is a tease. Of the 28 musical numbers, only three get applause because only three end conclusively enough to let the audience know they may acknowledge the performance. This is frustrating because, unlike watching a film, a live theater is about the interaction between audience and performer.

The creative team seems to disdain anything that approaches the appeal of a more traditional Broadway musical. Before it heads off to the Mark Taper Forum's Center Theatre Group, which co-produced the show with ACT, "The First Picture Show" needs to relax its rigid artistic standards and let the audience in. There's much to like here. The audience just wants to be more involved.

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