



ACT's production of "The First Picture Show" has its moments, but its vast cast is given a script that is burdened by far too much ambition.

KEN FRIEDMAN



Evan Pappas and Ellen Greene hook up in a scene from ACT's "The First Picture Show."

Again" scene, a spirited and funny introduction to First, Byrd sings "I woke up again" not as the triumphant exclamation of survival but as a weary statement from "the last leaf on the tree." Later, the actress meticulously humanizes the irascible First as she recalls the past and eventually connects with her relative.

Lennay (a surgical nurse on TV's "ER") plays Jane with an almost frigid detachment that raises questions as to why she's looking into her great-aunt's past at all. Jane lacks the creative passion and artistic fervor that was supposedly the driving force behind First. But that's not Lennay's fault; she's playing the role as the Gordons wrote it.

The young Anne is portrayed by Ellen Greene (Audrey in the movie version of "Little Shop of Horrors"), who transforms herself from a winsome 18-year-old dreamer to a driven, iconoclastic moviemaker, a trendsetter brave enough to make experimentation her trademark.

Los Angeles actor John Apicella, who like many of cast members plays multiple roles, is a bouncy bundle of fun as the eccentric immigrant Laemmle. Evan Pappas, fresh from "Parade" on Broadway, plays Louis, a tentative, affable nickelodeon operator who's oblivious to the changes around him; and Harry Waters Jr. (San José Rep's "Thunder Knocking on the Door") shows off his versatility as Jane's patient, frustrated husband, Ben, as well as the pragmatic, resilient black filmmaker Percy Waters.

ACT bites off more than it can eschew

BY MARK DE LA VIÑA
Mercury News Theater Writer
SAN FRANCISCO

REVIEW

FILM PRESERVATIONISTS have long warned of a need to restore old reels. Less than half of the 21,000 movies made before 1950 still exist, they say. The acid content in nitrate film stock eventually burns away the images.

Like old movies, the images of history have a way of fading, too — including those of the female filmmakers who helped invent and define the medium during the silent era.

A sort of feminist look at movie history is the basis for the American Conservatory Theater musical "The First Picture Show," a premiere by David Gordon and Aln Gordon ("Silent the First"). Like such recent ACT productions as "High Society" and "Golden Child," this production is being test-driven for a New York run.

Lacks fire

But while feminists and movie buffs might find the story fascinating, that doesn't necessarily mean it works for the musical theater.

"The First Picture Show" has some lyrical moments and a buoyant score by Jeanine Tesori (a Tony nominee for "Twelfth Night"). But the show fails to generate much heat.

Peter Maleitzke performs Tesori's music on an upright piano, like an accompanist at a silent-film screening, a nice touch for a cinema-centered piece. And his playing works wonderfully with Tesori's exuberant, often melodramatic arrangements.

Perhaps the play's problem is that its many aspirations clutter the central story of present-day documentary maker Jane Furschmann (Dinah Lennay), who wants to profile her great-aunt, the trailblazing Hollywood director Anne First (Anne Gee Byrd). The musical attempts to recognize forgotten film giants; acknowledge the contributions of early black filmmakers; examine the history of movie censorship and draw parallels to current legislation concerning the Internet; highlight the contributions of inspired female artists; and examine the difficult balancing act of professionals with families.

Jumping between 1994 and the early years of filmmaking, the play shows Jane uncovering the obscured yet inspiring tale of a fiercely determined film pioneer. Although the main characters are fictional, the authors place Anne in the company of historic figures such as Carl Laemmle (John Apicella), the clothing store manager who became the Universal Studios mogul, and Alice Guy Blach (Valda Setterfield), the first director of a narrative film.

A feisty character

Set on a sound-stage replica designed by Robert Brill, "The First Picture Show" rolls like a silent movie, complete with performers carrying handheld titles that explain the action.

But the 50-year-old Anne First — a blither, squawking woman in a wheelchair who just wants to die — is anything but silent. In the "Here I Am

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

5/14/99