



January 14 – March 2, 2003
Brighton Beach Memoirs

Reviewed February 5
Running time 2 hours 40 minutes

Frank Ferrante, well known both as a director and as an actor with a specialty in the material of Groucho Marx, stays behind the scenes for this mounting of the first of Neil Simon's autobiographical trilogy of life in the home of his parents in the Brooklyn suburb of Brighton Beach, just up the Long Island coast from Coney Island. Ferrante's touch, his taste for comedy and his emphasis on energy is evident as the gentle comedy draws more laughs per page than many productions of many of Neil Simon's plays produce.

Storyline: At 15, the would-be playwright introduces the audience to the stories of his family in the days before the outbreak of World War II. His father struggles with two jobs to make ends meet until a heart attack slows him down. His mother is fiercely protective. His older brother tries to pull his own weight holding down a job he hates and the men are outnumbered by the women because his mother's sister and her two daughters, one with questionable health, have moved in with them.

The cast demonstrates the strength of the pool of Philadelphia talent as every one of the parts is well performed by a local performer. Jesse Bernstein in the young narrator's role is funny and touching and energetic while Tom McCarthy sinks his teeth into the nostalgically touching part of the father. Even when the theatre has to call in a replacement in a key role, the quality of the production doesn't suffer. The night we attended the second cover for the important role of Aunt Blanche, Dana Aber, went on. She delivered a fine performance with quite a few deft touches.

There are many ways to approach a Neil Simon comedy. One is to concentrate on the human interest of the plot for he always has an intriguing story to tell. Ferrante makes sure that the plot is never far from the spotlight. Of course, with Simon's continued use of narration addressed to the audience, it is hard to wander too far from the plot. Another is to concentrate on the individuality of the characters for a Simon show is always full of people with interesting characteristics. Ferrante lets his cast have a field day with the quirks and peculiarities of each part but guides them away from any excesses that would come at the expense of the character's sense of worth. This is, after all, an affectionate portrait of people who Simon loved. A third approach is to set up the gags and go for the greatest number of laughs. Ferrante knows, however, that the best laughs come from affectionate recognition and he keeps the temptation to ham it up for the gags under control. As a result, the production is a successful balancing of the three approaches.

Physically, the production is first rate. The towering realistic set duplicates both stories of the Brighton Beach house with the two bedrooms for the kids above the dining room. The back yard is the apron of the stage. Costuming, lighting and set decoration / properties all contribute to a sumptuous theatrical version of the real world perhaps more true to the time and place than actual house Mr. Simon grew up in. There's a "warmth of memory" factor that is nicely applied in the work of the designers.

Written by Neil Simon. Directed by Frank Ferrante. Design: David P. Gordon (set) Colleen McMillan (costumes) Troy A. Martin-O'Shia (lights) Scott Smith (sound). Cast: Jesse Bernstein, Tom McCarthy, Dana Aber, Ellen Tobie, Alyse Wojciechowski, Jennifer Alimonti, Scott Greer.