

The Theater Times

JUNE 2008

www.theatertimes.org

Adam Baum and the Jew Movie

by Daniel Goldfarb, directed by Paul Mazursky

The Hayworth Theatre • June 6 - July 20, (Opened, rev'd 6/6)

Hollywood provides the setting and the marquee value for the first L.A. staging of Daniel Goldfarb's 'Adam Baum and the Jew Movie' (The Hayworth Theatre, through July 20). Director Paul Mazursky, whose famous films range from the broad-stroke comedy of 'Down and Out in Beverly Hills' and 'Moon Over Parador' to the detailed portraits in 'An Unmarried Woman' and 'Harry and Tonto,' applies the fine-tip brush to this layered look at how a major studio head in 1946 weighs his conflicted responsibilities to his art, business and society against the well-being of his nuclear and cultural families.

To wrestle those issues through two acts and two hours, Mazursky has two powerful allies working at the top of their individual strengths. Richard Kind, known for the sitcoms 'Spin City' and 'Curb Your Enthusiasm,' is a revelation as Samuel Baum, a little man with historic opportunities. Kind's is the rare performance, of both nuance and range, that will withstand repeat viewings. He works his material like a merchant caressing quality fabric, feeling even the subtlest shift from high to low. Complementing him is Hamish Linklater in a role that shows the range of an actor who a year ago was playing Hamlet locally under Daniel Sullivan's direction. Linklater's lanky affability moves organically to upright indignation as he feels the calling to stand up for principles – and his paycheck. Gregory Mikurak, as 13-year-old Adam, holds up the shortest leg of the ensemble stool without a drop in the balance.

But it is Kind's show. He takes a role that an actor with a shorter throw could be happy to have land in a performance like Mel Brooks' mayor in 'Blazing Saddles.' Kind gets all the laughs that lace the script, the kind of wonderful comedy that kept the Catskills Kosher. His Baum pressures a guest to have some nuts, then mutters in response to his selection, "Cashews. Of course. The most expensive." It's as funny as if it were from a famous Vaudeville sketch, but instead of coming across as clichéd self-parody, it deepens the character, reminding that men like this, who were key to forging Hollywood, landed in America without property, and lived with a sense that only that membrane of wisdom and chutzpah kept poverty from reclaiming them.

That fear propels Baum. The play is set in June 1946, a year after the Nazi surrender and full disclosure of the horrors of the extermination camps, and a few months from the conclusion of the first, war-criminal phase of the Nuremberg Trials. However, despite these revelations, widespread anti-Semitism continues to be embraced by too many Americans, with most of the rest in comfortable denial.

The irony, not lost on Goldfarb, is that Jewish studio heads had at their hands the power to influence public opinion through movies, which just had been shown to be effective to the opposite ends by Leni

Riefenstahl. So, when 'Soil in Utopia,' a book about a Jewish family's abuse by American anti-Semites, is published, Baum instinctively options it and sets out to have it adapted for the screen. After two writers fail to satisfy him (a loose thread in Goldfarb's story that needs more clarity), he hires a Gentile, Garfield Hampson Jr. (Linklater). When the story begins, the two are having a story conference after Baum has gone over Hampson's draft. As Baum systematically demands



Hamish Linklater
Gregory Mikurak
Richard Kind

PHOTO ZACH LIPP

CONTINUED

alterations that pander to the comfort zone of the mass – Gentile – market, Kind makes sure his character’s back pedaling is as funny as it is worrying.

Goldfarb has chosen 1946 for a very good reason. In addition to coming on the heels of WWII, it was the year that Hollywood did, if gingerly, tackle this subject. Two real films were in production at the time the fictitious ‘Soil in Utopia’ was being prepared. Dore Shary’s ‘Crossfire,’ which would be released in mid-1947, and Darryl F. Zanuck’s ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement,’ which would come out a few months later. The first would receive five 1948 Academy Award nominations, but ‘Agreement’ would win three of its five nominations. While ‘Crossfire’ is not referenced, ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement,’ adapted by Moss Hart and directed by Elia Kazan, plays a spoiler role as Baum presses Hampson for changes in time to beat the other film to market.

When he learns of the other film’s plot – in which the main character, played by Gregory Peck, is a Gentile reporter posing as Jewish to experience Anti-Semitism first hand (which will later work for racism in John Howard Griffin’s ‘Black Like Me’ and, less convincingly for sexism in Pollack’s ‘Tootsie’) – he hails it as a brilliant way to wrap a pointed message in kid gloves.

But Hampson insists that they have greater responsibilities: the least of which is being true to the book; the more important of which is to be true to the truth. The debate, which is heated, will end, not by force of intellect or persuasion, but when the person in power applies the anti-Semite label to his hired hand and dismisses him.

All this is played out against a backdrop of young Adam’s Bar Mitzvah. The love and insulation Baum wraps around his son opens the plays counter-balancing dimension. Baum’s motivations of entrenchment are complex. So as his devotion to family and faith dictate that he soften his message, he remains unconvinced of his role in the larger battle to make the world a better place for his son, not to mention extending that fight to push for better depictions of other American minorities, who the wise Goldfarb has included in references to the racist co-opting of Al Jolson in black face and Westerns in which Native Americans are played by non-Indians like young Adam.)

To Hampson’s point, real life producers 45-years after the play is set (and a half-decade before it was written) continued to bemoan the lack of progress. In a 1992 interview promoting a new film about anti-Semitism in 1950s America, Sherry Lansing told ‘The New York Times’ Bernard Weinraub, “Any time you don’t have a movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the lead or car chases and explosions, it’s hard to get made. When you have a movie about anti-Semitism in the ‘50s, it’s even harder. Studios don’t think there’s an audience for it. It took us nine years.”

Fortunately, the torch Hampson sought to carry was picked up by Goldfarb, and The Hayworth Theatre has mounted it with high visibility. The brilliance of Mazursky, Kind and Linklater make it shine brightly.

– *Cristofer Gross*

WITH Richard Kind, Hamish Linklater, Gregory Mikurak **PRODUCTION** Joel Daavid, production design; Traci McWain, costumes; Christopher Game, sound; Jennifer Kimpfbeck, stage management. Produced by Gary Blumsack and Danna Hyams