

THEATER REVIEW

A Good Old Musical: Three Acts, 'Tea for Two'

By Alvin Klein

April 20, 1997

IT happens 20 minutes into the second act of "No, No, Nanette" at the Paper Mill Playhouse here. Daniel Herron and Debra Wiseman, two lovely, scrubbed ingenues who just stepped out of a dream (he's Tom, she's Nanette) take center stage, just in front of a flowered gazebo.

With uncontainable ardor, Mr. Herron begins the verse:

I'm discontented

/with homes that are rented/so I have invented my own./ Darling, this place is/a lover's oasis/where life's weary chase is unknown.

Four lines follow before Mr. Herron glides into the evergreen song's refrain: "Picture you upon my knee/tea for two and two for tea." Soon, a stage full of dancers take flight. Gossamer variations by Donald Saddler, the choreographer, on the sweet contentment familiarity breeds set in motion the tantalizing fantasy that by now should have overtaken everyone in the audience, that of a private place for courting and romancing.

This is how musicals were. The entrancing interlude is over in just 11 minutes and 20 seconds, but then how long can you expect to sustain a sigh?

Mr. Saddler's staging is so all-embracing that "Tea for Two," the show's signature song ("I Want to Be Happy" is its defining one) involves none of the four stars of a truly four-star production. All have already had shining moments, with more to come in the next act-and-a-half. Yes, among its bountiful niceties, "No, No, Nanette" is a good old three-act musical, a genre mostly unremembered.

Those who attended the Broadway revival of 1971, then billed as "a new 1925 musical," may have the singular sensation of seeing one of those stars, Helen Gallagher, twice in this staging: once for real, once through felicitous memory. Giving in to the folly of chronologically correct casting, Ms. Gallagher is now playing Sue Smith, the wife of Jimmy Smith, the gallavanting Bible publisher. This is the part that vaulted Ruby Keeler out of retirement 26 years ago. Ms. Gallagher is not playing Lucille Early, the big spender, for which she won that year's Tony Award.

With her impish sexiness and wicked smile, Ms. Gallagher effervesces with the vintage spirit of the unwithered, unstaled school of infinite variety. She leaves no doubt that she could still negotiate Lucille's turns and she taps rings around Sue's.

Now it's Lee Roy Reams who partners Lucille as Billy Early, her husband, in the flashy stylistic changes of "You Can Dance With Any Girl" and on his own, as a Broadway song and dance man nonpareil. Mr. Reams appears unable to make an entrance without flair. Toss him a cane from the wings and he brings on the girls and brings back vaudeville.

Political or social animals know how to work the room; Mr. Reams works the whole theater. It is hard to imagine anyone out there in the dark feeling unacknowledged. But spreading cheer isn't all. Watch Mr. Reams operate as a savvy lawyer, buying off Jimmy Smith's tarts, and when he orders the obstinate Nanette to "go out and play," she'd better go.

Eddie Bracken has a mind-bending way of asking a question that stumps: "Why go to Philadelphia when there's someplace else to go?" And Kaye Ballard as a reluctant maid, masterfully conveys histrionic deprivation. She'd rather do high drama and low-down comedy -- anything but vacuum.

High society sounds under Jim Coleman's musical direction, Virginia Sandifur's classy Lucille and Gregg Barnes's drop-dead costumes enhance the grace of Mr. Saddler's work. Throughout the irresistible inanities of Burt Shevelove's adaptation, Ms. Wiseman maintains Nanette's innocent demeanor, declaring the show's theme: "No one will ever know what Atlantic City means to me."

"No, No, Nanette" is also about the chorus boys popping up anywhere, anytime, in Technicolor sweaters strumming banjos, or in black tie from behind french doors, not to mention the beach ball girls. It is about spooning and shopping sprees. It is about making Sue put on the chiffon dress with the beading. And it is about a world full of sunshine. A ticket to Paper Mill is all it takes to get to musical comedy heaven.

NO, NO, NANETTE

Paper Mill Playhouse, Brookside

Drive, Millburn.

Through May 25. Wednesdays through Sundays at 8 P.M.; matinees, Thursdays at 2 P.M., Saturdays and Sundays at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$31 to \$46; \$10 for students, 15 minutes before each performance.

(201) 376-4343.