

Cultural Daily

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Torch Song No Longer Shocks, But Still Moves

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 15th, 2017

When Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* was nominated for a Best Play Tony Award in 1983, presenter Diahann Carroll wasn't even allowed to accurately describe the tender, hilarious play. While giving a detailed synopsis of each of the other nominees, her copy for *Torch* merely summarized it as being "about love and the merciless mayhem loves wreaks." When the play unexpectedly won, producer John Glines sent shockwaves across America by thanking his male lover. (I remember Johnny Carson made a joke about it on *The Tonight Show* the following evening.) Even the show's TV commercial covered up its then-controversial content. Producers were afraid if Straight John and Jane Q. Public knew the show was about an unapologetic gay drag performer's quest for a long-term relationship and an extended family, they'd shy away.



Michael Urie in *Torch Song*

Credit: Joan Marcus

After *Falsettos*, *Will and Grace*, *Ellen*, same-sex marriage, and *Transparent*, Fierstein's heartwarming work no longer shocks, but still moves. Originally presented as three separate one-acts Off-Broadway, the nearly-four-hour comedy-drama with Fierstein repeating his role as the autobiographical Arnold Beckoff, *Torch Song* made the case for gay romance outside of bars and bathhouses. The current revival at Second Stage has been judiciously and wisely slimmed down to two hours and 45 minutes with only one intermission and the title has been shortened (not to be confused with Joan Crawford's 1953 film *Sudser* of the same name.)

Moises Kaufman's trim and slick production veers a bit too far into sitcom territory with broadly limned performances and borderline-schtick-y staging, yet the cast remembers there are pulsating hearts amid the pratfalls. At first Michael Urie's Noo Yawk-accented Arnold comes across as clownish. Plus it initially appears the athletic and boyishly cute Urie is all wrong for the gravel-voiced, self-deprecating Arnold. ("I've never been young or beautiful," he confesses to the audience in a revelatory opening monologue.) But Urie makes us believe that Arnold sees himself as unattractive and alone. He shows us the yearning beneath the mascara and that makes the sometimes exaggerated comic lines ring true.



Mercedes Ruehl in *Torch Song*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Mercedes Ruehl is his equal as Arnold's sharp-tongued, judgmental mother (a role that led Estelle

Getty to be cast on *Golden Girls*.) She deals dexterously in pathos as well as punchlines. So do Ward Horton, Michael Rosen, Jack DiFalco and Roxanne Hope Radja as various friends and lovers.

Later this season, there will be Broadway revivals of *Angels in America* and *The Boys in the Band*. Along with *Torch Song*, it will be interesting to see how these snapshots of gay culture play in today's somewhat-more-accepting climate.

Oct. 19—Dec. 9. Second Stage at the Tony Kiser Theater, 305 W. 43 St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm and 7:30pm, Thu 7 pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$99-\$129. (212) 246-4422. www.2st.com.

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