

Dated Plotline in Miss Teen at Stages Hampers a Good Cast

BY D. L. GROOVER

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Emily Neves (front) and Morgan Starr star in *Miss Teen* at Stages Repertory Theatre.

Photo by Bruce Bennett

The set-up:

Yes, the new play by Michele Riml, presented at Stages Repertory Theatre, might be a world premiere, but my question is, Exactly in what century was it written? *Miss Teen* has got to be the most old-fashioned melodrama imaginable since the Cotton Blossom plied the Mississippi.

The execution:

In the old days, when the world was depicted in black and white, this would have been known as a “women's picture,” a weepie, one of those directed by George Cukor or Richard Cromwell, that starred Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, or Barbara Stanwyck as the strong mom who'll stop at nothing to see her daughter succeed and get ahead in life. These steel-spined mothers sacrificed everything, even their own happiness. If you're a fan of TCM or AMC, you know the cinema type. It's long gone out of fashion, which is too bad because the moral is still strong and good – the rock-solid mother who fights and claws her way into society, or a business career baking successful pies, just so her precious little darling can have the better things in life that were denied mom. Better living through your daughter is the corporate motto. She is noble, self-effacing, and fairly fake. Like this play.

Musicals have this archetype, too. The Jule Stein/Stephen Sondheim *Gypsy* is the ultimate prototype. Would that *Miss Teen* had a musical score. It cries out to be sung. Obvious cues are built into it. “Our luck is turning,” “Those legs will get you places,” “Work your smile,” “Outside the city limits,” “I'm the mother of somebody,” and “Memories of May Queen” are tailor-made for the musical stage. Think of the ensemble dance number for the Miss Cheese parade, or the possibilities in the second act opener, “The Pageant.” There's even an 11 o'clock number, “Be Yourself,” no doubt a reprise, but why waste a great melody? Inherently, this is no *Gypsy*, but much lesser stories have been turned into Broadway gold, why not this 19th century chestnut about empty empowerment and mom's self-sacrifice?

Teen Margaret Biddle (Emily Neves, much too old to be a teen queen) has been crowned Miss Teen, an accolade bestowed upon her from the local mall. This might be her stepping stone to a career of careers. Mom Coco (Elizabeth Ann Townsend) is ecstatic, a fulfillment of her own failed young dreams. Younger sister Nicole (Morgan Starr, no more a convincing pre-teen than Neves is a convincing teen) is outwardly blasé and terribly introverted. Both these marshmallows are hardly daughters of hard-living, hard-driving Coco who already has her hands full with an ex-husband in the next room dying of pancreatic cancer and an ex-boyfriend who's just moved out, if he ever actually moved in. (I'm not quite sure, since I began to zone out pretty fast). Mom's desperate (not as much as we are) for Margaret to plow ahead and be all that she can be. Cue the anthem, “Our luck is unstuck.”

Nothing that follows in the unsurprising drama is the least interesting or exciting. Scenes go on and on, long after we've gotten the point the first time. Margaret's “manager” Dusty (Elaine Robinson), working out of temporary quarters at the mall, is a former Cheese queen or Miss Teen herself; but who cares, it's all so rote and by the numbers. She's a sham, too. They'll all shams. This play's a sham.

As in the classic movie *The Women*, the men in the women's lives are talked about obsessively but never seen. The guys are the fulcrum around which these pseudo-enterprising young women (and Coco, too) revolve. When dad rings his cowbell to summon a morphine fix for his pain, sometimes the women move quickly to help him, sometimes they continue playing the scene. Poor dad. He survives the play backstage. We're not so lucky, we've got to watch it.

The only real thing in this play is the Belasco-like set by Kirk Domer, an '80s kitchen to die for, if you were restoring a HGTV dream home from the early Reagan administration. You half expect actual water to gush out of the faucets. The braid rug under the kitchen table is well-nigh perfect, as is the linoleum floor and the period detail tchotchkes that line the shelves. This part of play looks lived in, actual. What surrounds the kitchen is faux.

The cast is much too good for the material. Sparkling and obtuse, Neves was a spectacular Marie Antoinette for Stages last season, and she's got charm and nerve for days, but playwright Riml gives her no depth. There's nothing underneath. The character is all surface and that's the only thing Neves can play. She does this exceptionally well, but that's all there is.

Townsend is a whole other animal. Her resonant mezzo supplies another character. We don't know exactly how she's going to say her next line, even though we know what the words will be. She plays with the timbre of a line, twisting it, spicing it up with a glance or a little movement, always giving it more than what's there. She's a consummate musician, playing her voice like a Strad. She rules the stage, all eyes on her, all ears, too. She's the heart of the play, even though Riml wants Margaret to be the one and only. Unstoppable, indomitable, Coco is a rock, and Townsend is Miss Teen's Gibraltar. What a Mama Rose she'd be!

The verdict:

Director Kenn McLaughlin does his professional best to divert our gaze from the script's shortcomings – that braid rug will later revolve as the platform for Margaret's parade float – which is slight-of-hand stagecraft of the highest order, but there's no ultimate savior for a play that's dated upon arrival.

Anyone know a good composer?

Miss Teen continues through May 1 at Stages Repertory Theatre, 3201 Allen Parkway. For more information, call 713-527-0123 or visit stagestheatre.com. \$21-\$49.