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Stars of David Brings Perspectives on Jewish Identity to the Stage

The Philadelphia Theatre Company's original new musical *Stars of David* has a uniquely Jewish focus. The show was adapted from the book *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk about Being Jewish*, written by Abigail Pogrebin, a journalist and former *60 Minutes* producer. In the prologue, Pogrebin explains her motivation for writing this book: "I was interested in what people who happen to be Jewish and happen to be famous think about being Jewish today, when a la carte Judaism is the norm and when strict observance and fervent Zionism have largely fallen away." The upshot of Pogrebin's curiosity is a book of over 60 interviews with successful Jews in America.

While exploring the Jewish identity of public figures is an interesting journalistic endeavor, it hardly seems fodder for a theatrical production, particularly a musical. However, it was Aaron Harnick, producer, writer and Pogrebin's old family friend, who proposed the idea. And unlike the reviewers in *The Inquirer* and *The Philadelphia Jewish Voice*, I think the show pulled it off.

One of the unique challenges for a production like this one was to convert a set of distinct interviews into a cohesive narrative. Charles Busch, who wrote the story for *Stars of David*, created a narrator who is engaged in a book project like Pogrebin's. The narrator is a journalist and non-practicing Jew who reacts to her daughter's request for a bat mitzvah by plunging herself into interviewing well-known Jews about their connection to their religion. Between each musical depiction of a famous personality, the audience is returned to the life of the narrator and her family. This weaving back and forth between interviews and family dynamics is so seamless that the show never feels disjointed.

Another distinctive feature of this production is the unprecedented number of composers and lyricists that participated in this project—21 in total, including legends like Alan and Marilyn Bergman, Jule Styne and Marvin Hamlisch. According to Carrie

Chapter, literary manager and dramaturg of the Philadelphia Theatre Company, it was Tom Kitt, Tony Award-winning composer and *Stars of David* contributor, who “suggested that different composers and lyricists ‘adopt’ each interview subject because such diverse personalities should be outfitted with equally distinctive voices.”

With thirteen main interview subjects portrayed during the show, some of the characterizations are naturally more appealing than others. Justice Ginsburg’s segment is particularly poignant, with soulful lyrics written by Pogrebin herself about Ginsburg’s experience as a young girl being prohibited—because of her gender—from participating in the minyan after her mother’s death. Other songs are much more light-hearted, such as the “The Book of Norman,” with clever lyrics written by Sheldon Harnick and sung by Brad Oscar in character as Norman Lear. And unforgettable is the characterization of Fran Drescher. Imitating that one-of-a-kind voice, actress Donna Vivino delights the audience with classic Drescher-like quips, such as describing Barbara Streisand as “the patron saint of Jewish girls.” There are, however, a few songs that seemed to be too long or were simply less interesting to me, possibly because I was unfamiliar with the personalities being depicted.

Although a one-hour-and-twenty-minute show cannot do justice to a 385-page book, the musical, *Stars of David*, is thoroughly enjoyable on its own, or as an entertaining prelude to the much meatier book.

Tickets for Stars of David are available at www.philadelphiatheatrecompany.org or at the box office, which is located at 480 South Broad Street (215-985-0420).