

Jerry's Girls @ New Jewish Theatre

Music and Lyrics by Jerry Herman

Conceived by Larry Alford, Wayne Ciento, and Jerry Herman

Ran December 1 - 18, 2022 @ The St. Louis Jewish Community Center

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It's pretty fitting that my final review of 2022 would be for New Jewish Theatre's production of *Jerry's Girls*, a celebration of one of the most legendary composers in the musical theatre canon. Jerry Herman wrote the scores for twelve Broadway shows, five of which were nominated for the Tony Award for Best Musical – and two of them won: *Hello, Dolly!* and *La Cage aux Folles*. Along with his other smash hit, *Mame*, Jerry Herman, with his endlessly hummable tunes, glamorous leading ladies, and unabashed love of life itself, almost single-handedly put gay musical theatre culture into the mainstream. What was simply implied before by composers like Cole Porter was now moved out in front and right in your face. If you imagine the stereotype of the gay musical fan today, you can just see them trying to imitate Dolly Levi or Mame Dennis or Zaza. Hell, when *Jerry's Girls* was on Broadway, the original cast was Carol Channing, Andrea McArdle, Dorothy Louden, Chita Rivera, and Leslie Uggams – all icons in the gay community.

What I really like about *Jerry's Girls*, outside of giving a lively showcase for St. Louis women actors, is how diverse the catalog is. Yes, Herman's three biggest hits are represented here, but so are his lesser-known works, a few of which I want to see produced someday: *Mack and Mabel*, *Milk and Honey*, *Parade*, *A Day in Hollywood / A Night in the Ukraine*, and *Dear World*. His breadth of diverse material really goes to show that Jerry Herman wasn't just a panderer: he was a true craftsman with deeply-felt empathy for women and gay men.

Jerry's Girls is a simple revue in that it's just these five women and their pianist, musical director Cullen Curth, showing their stuff. The uniformly excellent cast, most of whom are debut performers with New Jewish Theatre, are Kelsey Bearman, Molly Burris, Christina Rios, and mother-daughter duo Lisa and Greta Rosenstock. Everyone gets to have their own standout solo moments, but their best work is in the group numbers; their rapport together and with Curth on the piano is fun to watch. Director and choreographer Ellen Isom knows that this is a show all about celebrating these great, timeless songs, and she really lets these six performers do some neat work here, even putting unique twists on a few songs that were actually pretty cool.

The production design is also classic Jerry Herman. The set by Cameron Tesson is a columned cabaret stage bathed in gold and purple, prominently featuring a portrait of a flapper girl in the center panel – evocative of the traits that make for a quintessential Jerry Herman leading lady. Costume designer Michele Friedman Siler outfits each of the ladies in unique, elegant red dresses. Completing the glamorous cabaret stylings are David LaRose's lights, Amanda Werre's sound, and Katie Orr's props

The word I would best use to describe *Jerry's Girls* is "cute." It's an easygoing trifle, pleasant to the eyes and ears, but nothing more. New Jewish Theatre, however, made the show into a great showcase for some wickedly talented musical theatre artists; it's a theatrical experience well worth checking out, especially if you're a Jerry Herman fan. *Jerry's Girls* is a nice tribute to an incredible artist.