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THEATER REVIEW

THEATER REVIEW; A Story Still Painful After Repeated Tellings

By D.J.R. BRUCKNER

One day a successful play might appear about Leo Frank, who was killed by a lynch mob after his death sentence had been commuted to life for a murder he insisted he did not commit. An incident that helped revive the Ku Klux Klan and was instrumental in the founding of the Anti Defamation League of B'nai B'rith must have some dramatic value.

But for 85 years it has frustrated everyone who has tried to stage it, including a team of formidable artists who created the ill-fated musical "Parade" a few years ago. Perhaps the most dramatic version was the television film "The Murder of Mary Phagan," written a dozen years ago by Jeffrey Lane and George Stevens Jr. from a Larry McMurtry story, but even that included ample dozing time.

So, if "The Lynching of Leo Frank" is hardly destined for eternity, at least the playwright, Robert Myers, is in better company than most people ever get introduced to.

And there is one 30-minute segment when one has reason to hope he will succeed against the odds: the trial of Frank for the 1913 murder of Phagan, a 14-year-old worker in a Georgia pencil factory where Frank was the manager.

Mr. Myers sidesteps courtroom histrionics and even discounts glaring gaps in testimony to concentrate on the menacing anti-Semitic passions inspired by the prosecutor, Hugh Dorsey, and the local press. There is testimony by Frank and his principal accuser, Jim Conley, a janitor, and brief arguments by the lawyers; there are even rulings by a judge. But no judge or jury is seen; there are only the antagonists and the restless mob muttering threats from the benches or through windows and salivating at obscene slanders that filled the air during the real trial. Parts of this scene are inflammatory and all of it is emotionally stirring.

The guilty verdict against Frank -- delivered in secret because the jury was so terrified of the crowd, or so the judge said, if you are willing to believe it -- comes like a thunderclap.

But surrounding this brief excitement is an hour and 45 minutes of recitation of history and judgments from many authors, confusing stage business and outright preaching by the playwright, which no one would listen to if they were not in a dark, closed place. There are repetitive arguments about how racial discrimination against blacks differed from (or did not differ from) the surge of anti-Semitism at the time; there are instructions on pogroms in Europe and medieval blood libel against Jews; there is even

a vaudeville skit to demonstrate popular beliefs in that era in Georgia about Jews as landlords and moneylenders.

Two striking elements in the story are oddly muted here: the struggle of conscience of Gov. John Slaton, who commuted Frank's sentence, thus arousing the lynch mob and sacrificing his own career, and the astonishing emergence 70 years after the event of an octogenarian, Alonzo Mann, who had been an office boy in Frank's factory in 1913 and swore only in the 1980's that he had seen Conley dumping Phagan's body where it was found. Here, Mann hovers around the entire play in a wheelchair and his version of events, when it can at last be grasped, is less than compelling.

The efforts of Barbara Vann, the director, to keep things moving often appear more hectic than purposeful, and only a few of the actors stand out: Christopher Gasti's Dorsey is a loathsome political manipulator with violent ambition and no decency at all; Evelyn Adler makes a noticeable effort to rescue Frank's wife, Lucille, from cypherhood; Monrico T. Ward turns Conley into a homicidal perjurer of surprising charm and Brad Russell is a memorable Governor Slaton, even in comparison with Jack Lemmon in that role in the television film.

There is an odd omission in the cast listing. No credit is given for Mary Phagan. But an actress does turn up as Phagan collecting her last paycheck on the fateful day and being carried off dead. In fact when her friends sing hymns around her casket, the corpse emits a sharp keening sound. Surely that calls for a mention of the role in the program.

THE LYNCHING OF LEO FRANK

By Robert Myers; directed by Barbara Vann; music by Sandra Sprecher; assistant director, Ian Morgan; sets by Paul Gugliotta; set decor, Knox Martin; lighting by Izzy Einsidler and Doug Filomena; costumes by Melanie Wehrmacher; choreography by Margot Colbert. Presented by the Medicine Show Theater Ensemble, 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton.

WITH: Izzy Einsidler (Leo Frank), Evelyn Adler (Lucille Frank), James Barbosa (Alonzo Mann), Christopher Gasti (Hugh Dorsey), Monrico T. Ward (Jim Conley) and Brad Russell (Governor Slaton).

Photo: Christopher Gasti, left, and Monrico T. Ward in "The Lynching of Leo Frank." (Claudia Thompson/"The Lynching of Leo Frank")