

## **THEATER REVIEW;**

### **Immigrants' Tales**

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## **Body**

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"VAGABOND STARS," a musical at the Queens **Theater** in the Park in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, takes a look at the Yiddish **immigrants** of the early part of the century and chronicles their trials and tribulations.

It is a well-worn theme, but like the "boy meets girl, boy loses girl" plot that propels so many stories, its retelling is satisfying in part because it is so well known.

Since 1607, when the first English settlers pushed the Indians out of Jamestown, more than 42 million people have migrated to the United States. The journey itself was difficult enough, and for many it involved economic hardship and physical and emotional trauma. Yet, getting into America was frequently as hard, if not harder, than getting to America in the first place.

One result of human conflict is the synthesizing of real-life drama into **theater**, film, art and literature. In this country, 70 percent of the **immigrants** who arrived between 1890 and 1910 were refugees from Eastern and southern Europe, and when they came they brought with them centuries of music and drama that they had incorporated into an expression of their emotions about their adopted land.

The vast multicultural movement gave rise to vaudeville, Yiddish **theater**, contemporary musicals like "Fiddler on the Roof" and even recent movies like "Moonstruck." A simple listing of the artistic legacy of the vast immigration would fill volumes.

"Vagabond Stars," a musical by Nahma Sandrow, Raphael Crystal and Alan Poul, and adapted from Ms. Sandrow's book "Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish **Theater**," nestles comfortably into the theatrical body of **immigrant tales**.

In a series of sketches and songs, "Vagabond Stars" looks at the excitement and the loneliness of being a stranger in a strange land, where the only connection to the old country is a series of letters that form tattered, fragile links to former lives.

The creators of "Vagabond Stars" have adapted material from turn-of-the-century New York Yiddish **theaters**, and the show has the flavor of the pulsating Lower East Side with its romance, dreams, yearnings, hard work and bittersweet memories.

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As directed by Christopher Catt, the numbers flow easily between song and sketch and between pathos and humor, and the five-member cast exudes an infectious aura of good will. In fact, if there is a problem with this production, it is that everything about it is too nice. The passion of a transplanted people is turned into something as insubstantial as spun-sugar candy. It is pretty and sweet, but completely unmemorable.

The two women, Cynthia Firing and Guylaine Laperriere, have voices that carry all of the nuances within the songs. Eugene Flam, Fred Goldberg and John Patti are also capable vocalists. The five of them, designated points of a shining star, do their best to convey a sense of the diversity within the major influx of Jewish immigration. That they never manage to be anything more interesting than cute is a production flaw rather than a performance failure.

The stage is small and narrow, but the designer, Sarah Lambert, has pegged the flavor of the material by using scraps. They include bits of photographs of the Lower East Side with its crowded streets, posters from the Yiddish **theater** and headlines in Yiddish from The Jewish Forward. She has turned the curtain into a huge section of a passport, with its stamps and "official" signatures.

"Vagabond Stars" is pleasant, mild entertainment. In the comfortable cabaret setting of the Queens **Theater**'s small downstairs space in the New York State Pavilion, it turns into a mellow evening of reminiscing. It will continue through May 24.

## Graphic

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Photo: Members of the cast of "Vagabond Stars." (Carol Rosegg/Martha Swope Associates)

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