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## Theater: *Cactus Flower* Wilts

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**CACTUS FLOWER** \* out of \*\*\*\*  
 WESTSIDE THEATRE

So many things went wrong during one of the press nights for the revival of this comedy directed by Michael Bush, I thought perhaps we were seeing *Noises Off* (a show about a problem-plagued theater company) instead of *Cactus Flower*. Star Maxwell Caulfield struggled with his lines (messing up one bit at the beginning about a stewardess that should have had a pay-off at the very end), a music cue blared into action too soon, and some props clattered around. You might be tempted to dismiss this comedy as a tired work that was dated when it opened 35 years ago; it should have been left on the

shelf instead of (finally) being revived for the first significant production in New York, right? Except for one notable exception.

I'd heard of the show but never saw it or the film adaptation. It certainly has a terrific pedigree. *Cactus Flower* was adapted from a French play by Abe Burrows (who should get a much happier revival with *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying*). In it, a dentist tells his ditsy but sweet girlfriend that he's married so she won't get serious. When *he* gets serious, his nurse has to pretend to be his wife to reassure the girl she's no home-wrecker. It's no surprise that the nurse loves her dentist and the nebbishy writer next door (Jeremy Bobb) loves the kooky girl. Complications ensue. Somehow, it was a smash hit and ran for more than 1200 performances. Lauren Bacall and Brenda Vaccaro starred, but they were both shafted when it became a film and their roles were played by Ingrid Bergman (such a great comedienne!)

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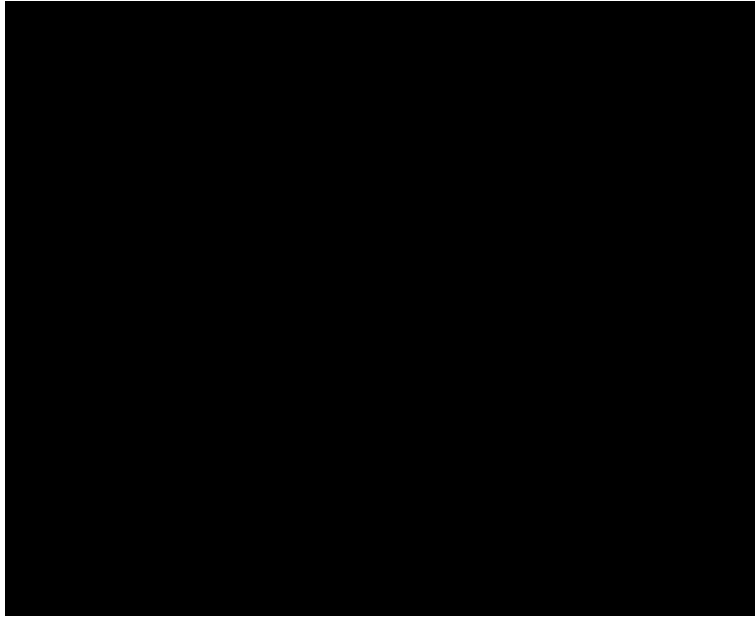


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and Goldie Hawn, who won an Oscar, though even the trailer for the film is quite leaden. The film was a smash hit too; one of the big hits of 1969/1970.



Caulfield plays the dentist here, jauntily running around the set to create a little energy (and perhaps jog his memory at times). For all I know Jenni Barber has never even seen the film, but her performance (not so bad) certainly evokes Hawn. The set by Anna Louizos is an all-purpose wooden affair that is meant to double as an apartment, a dentist's office (the closest to success they come) and a nightclub. Despite all the flipping of posters and moving of furniture it remains stolidly, boringly familiar throughout. Pop songs from the era punctuate every scene -- as the show progresses, they have a nominal link to the action (like playing "Born Free" when the nurse stands up to the dentist and walks out). But that just underlines the many times when the songs feel random and without purpose, just a noisy way to distract us from the lack of action.

So why the caveat? Because in the midst of this mess, Lois Robbins (a mainstay with roles on four different soaps) somehow manages to deliver a solid, funny performance. While everyone else is playing for laughs and delivering punch lines, Robbins is playing a character and delivering dialogue -- and naturally, that means she garners most of the laughs. I don't mean to oversell her work here. Just maintaining your dignity would be accomplishment enough. But Robbins is good enough to make me think that -- who knows? -- maybe *Cactus Flower* could be revived with the right attitude and cast, a la *Boeing Boeing*. Not that I'm eager to see it brought back anytime soon. But I am eager to see Robbins again in a show that let's her show her real talent at its best.

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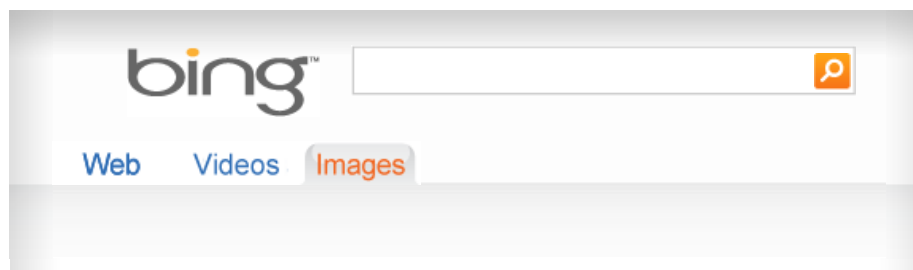
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