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CASA VALENTINA ** 1/2 out of ****

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INVENTING MARY MARTIN ** out of ****

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MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

The glass is half full, here. Playwright Harvey Fierstein must be on top of the world: decades into an extraordinary career, he's reached a new peak. Fierstein's musical *Kinky Boots* has become the Tony-winning, crowd-pleasing biggest new hit on Broadway, joining *Newsies* from one year earlier. Now he's got an original drama based on the true story of ostensibly straight men who would gather at a Catskills resort for the freedom to mingle with like-minded men in the clothing they felt most comfortable...women's clothing. (The nudist colony resort is just down the road for those who feel most comfortable in nothing.)

True, the play loses its way and doesn't quite work. But it's funny, fascinating and filled with great actors creating vivid characters that we remember even as some plot twists fade away. Fierstein clearly tapped a rich vein and delivered enough substantial material so these men (and women) could create some magic.

As the show notes make clear, this is not a story about drag queens or gay men or men who want to be women. (At least, at first...) Most men who wear women's clothing are in fact straight. In 1962, as women and gays and blacks and other minorities began to ask why exactly they didn't have the same basic rights as others, these men who liked to dress as women decided to organize too. Charlotte (Reed Birney) -- the publisher of a magazine catering to their interests -- has formed a non-profit organization. She's come from the West Coast to meet with the group that gathers regularly at a private resort in the Catskills and enlist their support.

It's the usual diverse gathering: George (Patrick Page) runs the financially troubled resort with his wife Rita (Mare Winningham), who knows of his taste in formal wear and is fully supportive, not to mention handy (she sells wigs on the side). Old friends soon appear. Tom McGowan plays Bessie, a full-figured, wise-cracking gal, whose family is dimly aware of something about his hobby but prefers blissful ignorance. Nick Westrate is delicious as Gloria, a Rosalind Russell-ish dame who proudly (and accurately) says he's a good-looking broad and a great-looking guy and has the conquests among the ladies to prove it. John Cullum is Terry, a sweetheart of an elder statesman matched in years and words of wisdom by "the Judge," Amy (Larry Pine). The newbie (you knew there had to be a newbie) is Jonathon (Gabriel Ebert of *Matilda*), who is adorably uptight as he transforms into Miranda.

Except for George (who soon dresses as the ring leader Valentina), they are unaware of Charlotte's push for visibility and legitimacy. Rather naively (it's the only naive thing about her), Charlotte thinks society will soon recognize their essential decency and harmlessness and most importantly distinguish between them and the homosexuals everyone assumes they are. To hammer the point home, Charlotte proposes they all sign affidavits averring their true blue, All-American heterosexuality...in high heels or sensible pumps, as the case

may be, but women-loving men nonetheless. All hell breaks loose.

Casa Valentina (directed with empathy and a sure touch by Joe Mantello) has a generally solid first act. The laughs come easily for Fierstein, but that doesn't mean we should underestimate the way he creates these distinct, memorable people with a few effective lines. It climaxes with a debate over legitimacy that's involving and genuinely moving.

It's almost a rite of passage for a new group seeking a place at the table to distance themselves from the more-despised people just below them. We're Irish but at least we're not Chinese. We're Catholic but at least we're not Jews. We're gay but we're not effeminate (or transgender). It may not always be official policy for these groups, but it's almost always happened in some shape or form as they struggled for rights. (Transvestites still remain more invisible than not, with comic Eddie Izzard raising eyebrows for enjoying a frock while doing his standup decades after the events of this play took place.)

But when Charlotte suggests the "I am not now nor never have been a homo" tactic, it exposes the facade of these particular men being peas in a pod. Soon we discover that some of them have dabbled in men, others haven't but yearn to with their whole heart and still others seem to be on a path towards gender reassignment. Before you know it, finding a good old straight male who likes frocks and females becomes downright difficult. Until that happens, their debate is the emotional and intellectual high point of the show. Gloria is wonderfully disdainful about throwing gays under the bus while Terry simply says that gays have always been welcoming to him and he can't imagine turning his back on them now. Cullum, always good, is especially moving here.

So we get to know this group of men, they face a heartbreaking choice or two and we wonder how they'll bear up. The central problem with the play is that however accurate it may be, seeing this group splinter and never come back together feels dramatically unsatisfying. A blackmail scene is riveting, with Larry Pine doing his best work of the night without saying a single word. But Miranda runs off into the night and the rest scatter to the four winds as well. They're never gathered again on stage, while the story wanders off towards Rita, who slowly realizes the life she has built for herself and George isn't enough for him. She's sacrificed everything for George, but it's Valentina that's taking charge. So we're left vaguely dissatisfied but with some indelible moments.

The scenic design by Scott Pask is an absolutely bizarre mishmash. Though the resort features several floors, the set is by and large on one level, with some upstairs rooms on stage left and others on stage right, with tables that serve as furniture in one room also serving double duty in another by being moved a foot or two. A large tree is shoving its way in from one corner. It must be a nightmare for the actors, who have numerous steps up and down and up again to get from one space to another and back again. And yet, somehow, it works. Touches like having actors come up out of the stage floor as if coming to the top of the stairs easily center us on where we are and the lighting of Justin Townsend and sound design of Fitz Patton (who also did the evocative music) surely work in concert with the staging of Mantello to pull this off. I've no idea how Pask imagined this or knew it would click, but it does.

Similarly, the costumes of Rita Ryack work in concert with the hair, makeup and wig design of Jason P. Hayes to perfection. Before the curtain rose, I giggled with anticipatory glee at the idea of Cullum in a dress. But from the haunting opener where we see the men in various stages of dress to the finale, I never thought of giggling at the sight of these men even once. Someone much smarter than me about fashion could identify the various styles and looks on display here and how they reflect the character of each man and when he became enamored of dressing like a woman. All I know is they each felt absolutely right in their garb.

As did the acting. Winningham feels the most underused here, perhaps because Rita is becoming extraneous in George/Valentina's life as well. But her natural empathy and warmth makes Winningham the perfect stand-in for the audience -- unquestioning and unflappable and kind to the core. McGowan's Bessie is a little too rat-a-tat-tat with the one-liners but he delivers them with aplomb and has a touching moment with Winningham that

deepens his character with one deft gesture. Page has the trickiest role -- his George grasps onto Charlotte's struggle for legitimacy as a way to distract himself from the far more difficult struggle within himself. He's always commanding but the play seems to interrupt his personal journey rather than illuminate it.

But Reed Birney steals the show as Charlotte. He's simply never been better. And talk about passing -- I would forget for long passages that this is a man playing a man playing a woman. I was so caught up in the machinations of Charlotte, I forgot everything but the person on stage Birney created. He's so faultless here, so completely in character, it ranks with Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie as one of the most complete and memorable performances of its type you'll ever see. Mind you, there's nothing lovable and heart-warming about Charlotte (if anything, you'll hiss at her). But Birney's work is so good, it makes a visit to Casa Valentina one you won't forget, flaws and all.

ACT ONE ** out of ****

VIVIAN BEAUMONT AT LINCOLN CENTER

A few years ago, I read the autobiography Act One by Moss Hart and needless to say loved it. Anyone who loves the theater -- or just good writing -- will savor his story of a hard-scrabble youth followed by an apprenticeship with the great George Kaufman as they struggle to turn Hart's comedy Once In A Lifetime into a hit. Like many celebrity memoirs, Act One knows the richest material comes before that first big success. It's a gem.

Clearly, writer and director James Lapine fell in love with it as well, to a fault. He loved it so much he couldn't bear to cut a single passage out of this sprawling work that goes from a childhood where Moss's eccentric aunt would take him to the theater to leaving school and working at a furrier, to his first theatrical job as an office boy to summers in the Catskills and on and on and on until act two where we finally get to Moss and George in a room together working on a play.

It's exhaustingly comprehensive, down to three different actors playing Moss, including Matthew Schechter as the boy Moss, the wonderful Santino Fontana as the eager young man Moss and Tony Shalhoub as the elder statesman Moss (not to mention Moss's father and Kaufman to boot). Andrea Martin plays three roles (most touchingly as Kaufman's wife) and so do several other actors as well.

The feeling of "more is less" extends to the remarkably complex and equally exhausting scenic design of Beowulf Boritt. It's a massive, massive contraption, filled with three levels of sets in a gigantic circular form and it spins and spins like a roulette wheel on its side, taking us from Moss's childhood home to a theater to the offices of a producer to a resort to Kaufman's lavish home to Atlantic City and about 27 more I've forgotten. Each particular scene is created with care and is effective as such. But visually it's a disaster: you're always seeing the sets to the left and right of the scene taking place, not to mention the sets way in the back and the piano located here and there to deliver Louis Rosen's fine original music.

The result is a jumble of images that leave you disoriented and always aware there is more to come and more just passed. It's the perfect embodiment of a show over-stuffed with incident. At two hours and 45 minutes, Act One is way too short to do justice to the entire book (that would need a TV miniseries) and far too long to focus in and offer up something dramatic and satisfying.

Of course, it's made with love and the cast is too talented to make the evening a bust, but the sense of dissatisfaction is never far away. Fontana is luckiest: he gets to play one role and play it well. The eager young talent who wants to do something -- anything! -- in the theater is the most appealing part of the show and Fontana brings his usual skill and warmth and comedic timing to the part.

Shalhoub is less fun as the successful Hart looking back on his youth. It may be true to reality, but his depiction of this man is somehow a little self-satisfied and priggish, be it the way he talks or what, I don't know. But he's

just not very likable as the elder statesman Hart and I doubt that was the intent. He's equally problematic as Moss's father, in part because the costumes of the obviously hard-working Jane Greenwood seem designed to keep him a little obscured so we're not so aware it's the same actor. (It doesn't help that this family from Britain has a panoply of accents, ranging from Shalhoub's almost South African diction to lower and upper class for the rest. Martin's diction, of course, is intentionally different but why are all the rest so varied?)

Where Shalhoub absolutely shines is as the phobic, almost Monk-like Kaufman. He gets a laugh out of just raising a finger and makes this enigmatic artist come to life for us just as he slowly does for the awed Moss. Showing two guys in a room creating a play is very, very hard to do in a way that's not boring. They have one wonderful scene where they're rewriting dialogue and actors are delivering the lines below them on another set, changing the lines as they get erased and done over. It's very effective and you can't help wishing the show had begun with Moss knocking on George's door and stuck with this one, central section of the autobiography. It's the source of the richest material and funniest moments, both in the book and here on stage.

But even at the end, they can't resist including every single moment. The memoir ends with Hart famously coming home to his family's hovel in the Bronx as soon as the show has opened to huge success and bundling his family into a cab and moving them all to Manhattan right on the spot. I remember it well.

But the emotional climax comes earlier, when there's a curtain call and George S. Kaufman -- one of the giants of the theater at that time -- steps forward to say something. Kaufman disdains speeches at the curtain call (along with sentimentality), but in a lovely gesture, he steps forward anyway, silences the roars of applause and tells the assembled people with modest grace that he wants them to know that 80% of the show they've just seen is due to Moss Hart. This tells you all you need to know about Kaufman and what a life-changing moment it was for Hart. It's dramatic and moving and wonderful...and almost slips by here as the set immediately starts to rotate because they're already moving on to the next scene.

Yes, I know, the next scene lets Moss make peace with his father and it's lovely in the book. But you've got to know how to cut away the underbrush. Kaufman knew. Hart learned. Lapine here, blinded by love, clearly forgot.

INVENTING MARY MARTIN ** out of **** **YORK THEATRE COMPANY**

The York Theatre company makes a speciality of revues and their revival of Maltby and Shire's *Closer Than Ever* was one of the best in recent years. Now they're presenting a world premiere of a show looking at the great Mary Martin. The subtitle is the clever tag "the revue of a lifetime," since it tells the story of Martin and how she went from a Texas wife teaching dance steps for the local kids to an almost-big Hollywood actor and finally to a legendary Broadway star.

Unfortunately, despite some talent doing their darndest, that's about the extent of cleverness for this show conceived written and co-directed by Stephen Cole. (Bob Richard shares the directing duties.) It's perfectly harmless fare, with some newly written lyrics set to famous melodies to move the story of Martin's life forward via song. They've also tossed in puppetry, a skit from a live television broadcast involving fashion, mild Ethel Merman jokes, some songs Martin never sang and more.

But it all feels a little routine. While the show avoids some of her signature numbers and rejiggers others to present them in a fresh way, the four performers never really get a chance to put their stamp on the material. A revue of course pays tribute to its subject, but it also needs to showcase the people performing now or why not just go back to the original cast albums?

Jason Graae is the hardest working man on stage. Okay, he's the only working man on stage, but he does do anything and everything for a laugh while genially and smoothly relating the facts of Mary Martin's life. It's telling that in a show about Martin with three women singing and dancing their hearts out, it's Graae you remember

best. (Someone get this man a Borscht Belt comedy, pronto!) Sure they offer tidbits some might not know (Martin turned down Oklahoma!), but it's safe to say everyone in attendance is already a fan.

Emily Skinner of Side Show was the draw for me. She shines on "I Got Lost In His Arms" and the playful "Swattin' The Fly" and I generally just got a little depressed she hasn't been on Broadway since Billy Elliot. Cameron Adams was the dancing triple threat on various numbers. And Lynne Halliday brought up the rear. The three worked together well on the Andrews Sisters-like "Most Gentlemen Don't Like Love."

But too much of this sincere show lands on obscure fare. I love every song in The Sound Of Music but doubt I'd pick "The Lonely Goatherd" as a showcase for celebrating Martin. Did we need to hear Noel Coward's "Alice Is At It Again," a naughty tune she turned down (perhaps rightly if she feared being typecast forever as a saucy girl)? Yes, Graae delivers it very well, but in a 90 minute show, too many numbers feel beside the point. The result? After this revue, you return to the cast albums not because they've reminded you what a remarkable talent she was but to remind yourself of what all the fuss was about in the first place.

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