

**Last of the Great Dames**  
**By Gary Smith**  
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Take five terrific performers, inventive staging, no time-wasting plot, and the magnificent songs of Jerry Herman, and you have one doozy of a show.

“Jerry’s Girls”, a nostalgic rummage through the song trunk of Broadway’s classiest songwriter, is a fast-paced, high-octane evening of get-down entertainment.

It glides, swings and canters across the tiny stage of Hamilton Theatre Inc.’s intimate Studio Theatre with the warmth of a three-alarm blaze.

Almost everything about this appealing entertainment is designed to buoy the spirit and massage the soul.

So when this sensational HTI cast tears into the Herman songs like five she-wolves in heat, you are unashamedly swept along, borne aloft by the production’s infectious, ingratiating good humour.

Unabashedly old-fashioned, determinedly tuneful, “Jerry’s Girls” comes from a Broadway that knew how to sing and dance. It comes from an era before Andrew Lloyd Webber sent cunning little “Cats” cavorting around the junkyards of the imagination, before Boubil-Shonberg erected Paris barricades, and before Frank Wildhorn plunged us into the dark heart of “Jekyll and Hyde”.

Herman’s shows were love songs to hope, anthems to immortality, splayed across the New York stage with every bugle bead, every exotic feather, every sparkling sequin perfectly intact.

They sang about good times, bum times and the very best times. They burned with an incandescent fever that was fun to catch.

Mostly they celebrated a world of eccentric, big-hearted dames, outsized creations from Dolly to Mame. Life’s great survivors, these Broadway babes sang about broken promises, broken hearts, broken dreams.

But always behind the stab of pain, “Jerry’s Girls” had the pluck to go on, to pick up their feather boas, to rattle their beads and give life one more laugh in the face.

And that’s what they do here, in this celebration of the very best of Herman’s theatre songs. Collectively, these Herman characters fill the stage with a barely tarnished brilliance, a haunting echo of the wonderful shows from which they’ve been wrenched.

From “Hello Dolly” to “Mame”, from “Milk and Honey” to “La Cage aux Folles”, they are forever familiar, forever fresh, forever tinged with recognition, yet unexpectedly revived by a present day patina of spit and polish.

Even when “Jerry’s Girl” stops to consider the Herman flops, the wonderful “Dear World” and “Mack and Mabel”, it is with the cunning realization that most of what was wrong with these now cult status musicals wasn’t about Jerry Herman after all, but about an audience unwilling to go where he inventively led.

Well, that doesn’t happen here. “Jerry’s Girls” opening night audience went the yards. They laughed, cheered, hooted and hollered each new yet familiar number until I thought they’d go hoarse.

If there’s a standout in the cast of five, and I think there is, it’s the wonderful Barabara Fisher.

A powerhouse of energy, she tears into the sexy raunch of “Take It All Off” with bedraggled exuberance, feather boa flopping, lips flapping, eyes rolling in exquisite insinuation.

Later, she comes back to sing the socks off “Gooch’s Song” from “Mame”, a fecund, tottering, roly-poly ball of mirth that has you collapsing with the giggles.

But as good as she is, Fisher isn’t the whole of this show. There are other highlights here.

Lyla Miklos – darkly dramatic, close-cropped and captivating, an image of high-duty revolution – makes a powerful anthem of liberation out of “I Am What I Am” from “La Cage Aux Folles”, modulating up and up to a final crashing note of smirking triumph.

Compellingly exotic Donna Pitt, a latter day Sherri North, makes a meal of Nelson in a hilarious send up of Jeanette MacDonald dissing the sawed-off Nelson Eddy who appeared with her in all those terrible MGM operettas.

And Carolyn Campbell and Catherine Goosney, both stunning lookers, make an emotional moment of contact with the sweetly seductive “La Cage Aux Folles” love song “Kiss Her Now”.

There are so many great songs here it’s hard to pick favorites.

The brilliant “Time Heals Everything” from “Mack and Mabel”, “Just Leave Everything to Me” from the film version of “Hello Dolly” and “If He Walked Into My Life” from “Mame” are songs that define the musical theatre experience.

Not everything works perfectly. You long for more drama, more punch, more gut-wrenching pain in the big ballads that ought to be interior journeys, mini-dramas of the broken heart. That doesn’t happen here. It’s not enough just to sit and sing these heart-wrenchers, they have to be wrung from the inside out.

On the production side, Sharon Reynolds' staging, particularly of the group numbers, is slickly polished and unobtrusive.

Beryl Harrison's costumes add welcome flash and dash against Lynne Jamieson's rather gray yet serviceable setting.

And Donna-Dunn Albert and David Simpson labour in the pit, helping to drive this energetic "Jerry's Girls" effectively along.

Petty objections aside, if you care about the Broadway musical and the effervescent spirit of optimism it once reflected, if you long for songs that are unashamedly warm, witty and wonderfully wise, go see "Jerry's Girls". It revives a Broadway we may never see the life of again.