

The Cradle Will Rock

By Marc Blitzstein

Theater Ten Ten
1010 Park Ave. (85th St.)

Review by Ronald Gross
NY Theater Buying Guide

IN BRIEF: Our highest recommendation! A superbly directed and beautifully performed revival of the riveting social-protest play that resulted in “the greatest theater story ever told.”

This 1937 musical comedy about the struggle of a union organizer against a conniving plutocrat, has a history as exciting as the theater piece itself – a story turned into a great 1999 movie by Tim Robbins, with an all-star cast including Vanessa Redgrave, Susan Sarandan, and Bill Murray.

The play was originally a part of the Federal Theatre Project, directed by Orson Welles, and produced by John Houseman. When their production was shut down because of its radical message, the theatre was padlocked and surrounded by armed guards.

Yet the artists found a way to perform it despite all obstacles, and what resulted was a great and moving moment in theater history. The entire cast and 1,000 ticket-holders marched downtown to another playhouse, and performed the entire work impromptu, with the actors speaking from the audience because they were prohibited from appearing on-stage.

There is no more shining moment in the history of American political theater.

This long overdue revival is directed by David Fuller, whose musical productions have been nominated by the Innovative Theater Awards for "Outstanding Production of a Musical" three times in the last four years.

Set in "Steeltown, USA", *Cradle* portrays the efforts of Larry Foreman to combat wicked businessman Mr. Mister by unionizing his steel plant.

Marc Blitzstein, the genius who concocted the book, music and lyrics for this agitprop masterpiece, was an equal opportunity satirist. In the course of the play he skewers and roasts not only the power-crazed CEO Mr. Mister, but also fries an equally despicable

university president, a dishonest physician, two sycophantic artists, a corrupt clergyman, and a spineless newspaper editor.

Tellingly, the only person who is NOT corrupt, aside from the union organizer Larry Foreman, is a forlorn young woman driven to prostitution by hunger.

The performances are uniformly outstanding, led by Bill Newhall as the corporate bully Mr. Mister, Damron Russel Armstrong as the corruptible Reverend Salvation, Michael Baxter as an airhead playboy, Tessa Faye as the hilarious Mrs. Mister, Greg Horton as the swishy hanger-on Dauber, Bellavia Mauro as the moving Moll, Christopher Michael McLamb as the craven Editor Daily, Robert Meksin as the fawning President of College University, Michael C. O'Day as the archetypal Cop, Josh Powell as the rabble-rouser Larry Foreman, and D. Zhoninsky as the poignant Harry Druggist.

And special kudos to the Musical Director and Accompanist, Erich Thomas Johnson.

Director David Fuller is masterful in realizing his stirring vision for the show, which he eloquently explains in a program note: *“’Steeltown USA’ may be a thing of the past, but change it to “Oil-town” or “Mortgage-town” or “Insurance-town” or “Meatpack-town” and the stories of Joe Worker and Larry Foreman ring true. When Harry Druggist tells his tale, perhaps we may think of a town Wal-Mart took over, or of a dark empty local storefront we passed today. In Cradle we see artists selling out to the wealthy, healthcare influenced by big money, the press owned by big business, the church controlled by its donors and war encouraged for corporate greed.”*

In providing a home for Theater 1010, the Park Avenue Christian Church is making a unique contribution to the artistic life of New York City. Founded in 1955 as an Arts Outreach Program of the Park Avenue Christian Church, it is the city’s longest consecutively operating Equity Theater Company. It is dedicated to producing classic and contemporary plays and musicals and to providing a nurturing atmosphere for both emerging artists and seasoned professionals.

This production is a high point in the distinguished career of Judith Jarosz, who has served as the Producing Artistic Director of Theater 1010 for the past decade, and is one of the most talented and dedicated leaders of “Indie Theater”.