

Excellent cast in musical revue

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Those Were the Days" continue through May 10. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.



BARBARA MICHALS

rich, joyous melodies for the first time.

The five-person cast is uniformly excellent, an interesting mix of youthful talent and mature experi-

ence reaching directly back to the pre-war days of an international Yiddish theater.

Act I focuses on shetl, the traditional small Eastern European Jewish Village. A goosamer thread of plot holds together the folk songs, courtship, and marriage. There's a bittersweet longing for this lost world that, though fraught with hardships, represented a simpler, more ordered time.

ACT II abandons plot altogether as it turns to the days of the Yiddish music hall, featuring a combination of vaudeville-type songs and comic routines. Here, the humor is so trite that the pleasure comes from the audience's instant recognition and eager anticipation of the punch lines.

Nicely underscoring the whole is

the six-piece Golden Land Klezmer Orchestra under musical director Zelman Mlotek, who conceived the show as well. The wonderful numbers that feature Howard Leshaw on clarinet are worthy of a concert all their own.

Lori Wilner and Eleanor Reiss are the young singers who are impressive for their fluency in Yiddish and their fine voices. Reiss also directed and choreographed the show flawlessly.

Reiss is amusing as a maid, lambasting her employer with colorful Yiddish curses like "She should be like a chandelier — hanging by day and burning by night!" She is also capable of great tenderness, as in the plaintive "My Yiddish Mama."

Wilner belts out passionate torch songs with ease and adds her lively touch to numerous duets, trios, and

ensemble numbers.

ROBERT ABELSON, a veteran opera singer and cantor, has a magnificent voice matched by a regal stage presence. While he deftly handles the comedy and ensemble numbers, his talent shines to fullest advantage in a wonderful Yiddish rendition of "Fugate's Aria" from "The Barber of Seville."

Sensuous Mina Bern, whose 54-year career in the arts reaches back to Yiddish theater in Poland, sings and dances with as much zest as the younger cast members. She has instant rapport with her audience, whether pining as a shrewish wife who makes Abelson lament "I Wish I Were Single Again" or delivering the bittersweet monologue of an old mother used and abused by her now grown children.



Musical revue: Mike Burstyn, (left to right), Mina Bern and Robert Abelson in the English-Yiddish Broadway musical revue "Those Were the Days" at the Birmingham Theatre.

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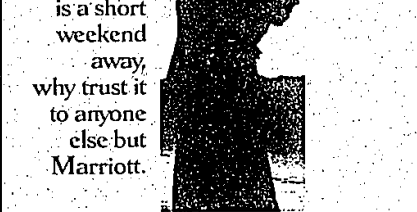
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