

Midler soars as Mama Rose in CBS' lacerating 'Gypsy'

By John Crook

Bette Midler has the role she was born to play as the stage mother from hell, in "Gypsy," which premieres Sunday, Dec. 12, on CBS.

Angela Lansbury won a Tony for her performance in a revival. Ditto, Tyne Daly. Inexplicably, the role's creator, Ethel Merman, didn't. Count on Midler as a Best Bette in the Emmy race next year.

Theater connoisseurs generally consider "Gypsy" to be the ultimate "book musical" (as the term implies, a musical that tells a genuine story, as opposed to the spectacle of, say, "Cats.")

Playwright Arthur Laurents obviously knew what he was onto when he subtitled his script "a musical fable."

Opening in Seattle during the early '20s, "Gypsy" tells the fact-based story of stripper Gypsy Rose Lee (Cynthia Gibb), her mother, Rose (Midler) and sister, June

(Jennifer Beck). Long before the phrase "dysfunctional family" came into vogue, "Gypsy" nailed the concept — and with music, yet.

Audiences who don't know the show may be startled by how dark it is. Rose Hovick drives her children to achieve the show biz success she never garnered herself, moving down everyone in her path — including their agent, Herbie (Peter Riegert), who loves her. And anyone who knows "Everything's Coming Up Roses" only from elevator muzak is in for a shock: In context, especially as performed by Midler, this is a very scary song.

"I've always wanted to play that character," Midler says. "I'd never really thought about where I would play it. I would have played it in stock, if I had the chance. It's a great part. The score is extraordinary. The writing is just incomparable."

Not only is it incomparable — it's

intact. Not wanting to argue with success, CBS, thankfully, filmed the play using the original script. Even Jerome Robbins' original choreography is recreated.

"And what's nice about our show is that a good deal of it is live," Midler says. "It's live singing. That was a real step forward for us. We were nervous about it, but we just took the bull and we ran with it. And that's something that's hardly ever done anymore. And we were very anxious to do it, because, first of all, nobody does it. And it's a big challenge. And we felt we rose to the occasion. I hope everybody feels that way, but if they don't... there's always the remote!"

The show's most shattering moment comes during "Rose's Turn," the musical theater equivalent of an operatic mad scene, in which Rose vents her decades-old rage at having to enjoy only vicarious success. Midler says she found the number daunting, to say the least.

"That was the real challenge," she says. "It's full of emotion. It's full of — all those HIGH Bs! 'Rose's Turn' was hard because it's very intricate. It has key changes and tempo changes. A lot of it is done 'ad lib rubato.' It's a terrifying piece of music because it's one of the two famous arias in the musical comedy lexicon, the other one being the soliloquy from 'Carousel.'"

"Gypsy" has whetted Midler's appetite for other musical comedy vehicles and she gleefully solicits interest from potential producers.

"I'd like to do 'Mame.' I'd like to do 'Annie Get Your Gun,'" she says. "I'd like to do all those kind of 'broad' parts, you know?"

Although Midler plays a driven stage mother in "Gypsy," she says she would hate for her daughter, Sophie, to go into show business. "I think it's a very hard life," she says. "Especially if you're not in the big, big, big, big, big, big time. You know, if you just meander along, it's hard. It's really, really hard. And I don't want her to have to suffer those things."

But if Sophie insisted? "I'd have to try to whip her. Soundly."

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