

Proctors Theatre, Schenectady, NY

**Funny Girl**, book by Isobel Lennart, revised by Harvey Feldstein. Lyrics by Bob Merrill.

Music by Jule Styne.

Directed by Michael Mayer. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

**“Who Taught Her Everything She Knows?”**

Fanny Brice was a major star on Broadway from 1910 through the mid-1930s. She was also a radio star with her character Baby Snooks and appeared in several early talkie films, finally playing herself in MGM’s “The Great Ziegfeld.” Never a beauty she was celebrated for her many character roles, often using a “Yiddish” accent to accentuate the comedy of her performances. In spite of these seeming limitations within her work, she was extremely popular with audiences. When her daughter Frances was unable to complete a satisfactory biography about Fanny, Ray Stark, her husband, assumed the role of Brice-remembrance and at the behest of Broadway star Mary Martin, began working on a show about his wife’s mother. Both Eydie Gormé and Kaye Ballard were rumored to star in the show which eventually went to the young Barbra Streisand who made the role and the show acceptable to general audiences; it played over one thousand performances on Broadway. Streisand later played the role in London and in movies (twice). She had recorded the song “People” long before the show opened and its hit status made her ever more the obvious choice for the role.



The cast of the National Tour; Photo: Matthew Murphy

The touring production now on stage at Proctors in Schenectady is a transfer from the

2022 Broadway revival which includes two songs not in the original production and a revised book with a lengthy and tedious ending written by Harvey Fierstein. To be fair and accurate Streisand had recorded the song “Funny Girl” as one side of a 45rpm disc but never sang it in the final show as it opened on Broadway. (The flip-side was a different song, also called “Funny Girl.”) The other “new” song,

“Temporary Arrangement,” is sung in the show by Fanny’s husband Nicky Arnstein; it adds little to the show. Arnstein, portrayed as Fanny’s only suitor in this show, was actually Brice’s second husband; she had three, all of whom she divorced. She married number two in 1919 and divorced him in 1927.



Hannah Shankman, Stephen Mark Lukas;  
Photo: Matthew Murphy

At the opening performance at Proctors Arnstein was played by the understudy, Sean Seamus Thompson, who did a creditable job as the handsome gambler He was one of four replacements in the cast that night.

Fanny was portrayed by Hannah Shankman, a lyric soprano whose lovely looks gave no hint of Fanny Brice’s awkwardly ethnic appearance. She seemed to have difficulty maintaining a New York accent and had a tendency to drop or eliminate or obscure the final syllable in many of the lyrics she sang. Both Brice and Streisand made every letter in every word count for the sake of both clarity and comedy. Shankman’s performance left a lot to be desired, although vocally she sang the hell out of every number receiving major ovations for her delivery.

“It hurts me to say it, but why not be fair,” as Eddie Ryan, the man who claims mentorship of Fanny’s performances, Izaiah Montaque Harris was an absolute delight singing and dancing as though he couldn’t help himself. His joyful performance was easily equaled, if not surpassed by Melissa Manchester as Rose Borach (or Brice), Fanny’s saloon keeper mother. She has lost none of her chops over the years and made a very real character out of Rose, the most supportive stage mother of all time (move over Audra McDonald, Mama Rose in



Melissa Manchester, Hannah Shankman;  
Photo: Matthew Murphy

“Gypsy,” another Jule Styne show.)

The supporting cast did a fine job with their roles, particularly Walter Coppage as Florenz Ziegfeld and Cheryl Stern as Mrs. Strakosh, a poker buddy of Mrs. Brice. Leah Platt was a sympathetic Emma, Fanny’s dresser.

Director Michael Mayer’s odd imagistic concept for the show was overly theatrical and sometimes intrusive but the choreography by Ellenore Scott was quite good. Even better was the tap dance choreography by Aydele Casel. Scenically the show was attractive with sets designed by David Zinn, lighting by Kevin Adams, sound designed by Brian Ronan and Cody Spencer. The beautiful costume design by Susan Hilferty, which should have moved us through time from 1910 to 1927, kept the show grounded at somewhere around 1919 for most of the performance. Fanny’s final dress was a stunner for more than one reason.

What makes this show worthwhile is hearing the superb score beautifully played and sung by a company that kept the show alive with singing, even if the tempos of songs were sometimes outrageously fast. Knowing the show helps because those fine lyrics can be heard in your mind’s ear memory, even when they are obscured in the live performances.

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**Funny Girl** plays at Proctors, 432 State Street, Schenectady through April 6. For tickets call the box office at 518-346-6204.

