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## 'Gypsy'

Camelot production of Broadway classic is a blockbuster

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Hannah Gassaway (Louise), left, and Livia Genise (Mama Rose) appear in Camelot Theatre's "Gypsy." Photo by Steve Sutfin

By **Roberta Kent**

Tidings reviewer

Posted: 2:00 AM March 29, 2012

Camelot Theatre's newest musical production, "Gypsy," is a blockbuster. With music by the veteran Broadway composer Jule Styne, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by Arthur Laurents, it spawned such classical numbers as "Everything's Coming Up Roses," "Small World" and, of course, "Let Me Entertain You."

"Gypsy," which opened Friday, chronicles the early career of the elegant, wise-cracking stripper Gypsy Rose Lee, her actress sister, June Havoc, and their "stage mother from hell." Although the title of the show spotlights the young Gypsy, whose name really was Louise, the star of this show is Mama Rose.

Played by Camelot Artistic Director Livia Genise, Mama Rose is the ultimate stage mother, but she also has been described by New York Times critic Clive Barnes as "one of the few truly complex characters in the American musical." Genise effectively conveys that mixture of brashness, ambition and vulnerability that makes "Gypsy" so interesting to watch.

Lee's memoirs put a humorous and nostalgic spin on her rather horrific childhood. After Mama Rose's divorce from the girls' father, she used her children to live out her dream of being a vaudeville star. While Louise was awkward and without much talent, Baby June had enough verve and star quality for all of them. (It is said she could dance en pointe at the age of 2. Mama Rose billed her as "the pocket-sized Pavlova.")

Mama Rose mounted a full-scale kids' act around June, with Louise usually playing one of the chorus boys around her, and the act successfully played vaudeville venues across the country. As June grew up into an ingénue, the act gradually changed, but Louise was always kept in the background.

When June eloped with one of the chorus boys to get away from her domineering mother (she was probably about 15 — the girls never knew their real ages), Rose reluctantly turned to Louise. The chorus boys were replaced with young blond women and the awkward Louise became the "star." By this time, the late 1920s, movies were replacing vaudeville and the act soon was reduced to performing in burlesque theaters, which vaudeville performers saw as hitting bottom. Since Louise couldn't sing or dance, the only performance avenue open to her was stripping and her mother pushed her into it.

Sondheim and Laurents had just come off "West Side Story" when producer David Merrick and musical

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stage icon Ethel Merman approached them to do a play based on Lee's memoirs. Lee was the stripper who became "respectable" by actually taking off very little but doing so in a provocative way, with witty patter as she strutted and tantalizingly removed inoffensive bits of clothing. Yes, she earned her initial fame at Minsky's Burlesque in the '30s, but in the 1940s, she went on to star in lavish Broadway revues, produced by her then-lover Michael Todd (yes, the Michael Todd who, much later, married Elizabeth Taylor). In the 1950s, Lee became a regular on television talk shows with her clever, slightly risqué patter. She also wrote a couple of best-selling mystery novels.

What Styne, Sondheim and Laurents created became one of the most popular American musicals of all time. "Mama Rose" and "Gypsy" have become more widely known to a subsequent generation than they could have imagined in their own time.

Camelot's production, directed and choreographed by Rebecca K. Campbell, does a vibrant and enthusiastic job of bringing "Gypsy" alive, with Genise as Rose, Hannah Gassaway as Louise and Don Matthews as Herbie, Rose's perennial suitor and the act's agent.

Gassaway, a junior in the acting program at SOU, is wonderful as she transforms the awkward, rejected Louise into the glamorous, self-assured Gypsy. Matthews, of course, has a superb voice, but his acting abilities really shine here as well, as he portrays the hapless Herbie, hopelessly in love with Rose but unable to stand up for himself or the girls when he sees her whirling out of control.

The rest of the cast is equally fine, especially Katie Elias, Kelly Jean Hammond and Christina Dewar as the veteran strippers "with a gimmick."

Production design is by Don Zastoupil, with lighting by Joshua Heuertz, sound and video by Brian O'Connor and costumes by Ellen Alphonso. Mark Reppert is the music director of the live off-stage orchestra.

"Gypsy" plays at Camelot through April 22. For more information, call 541-535-5250.

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