



FRITZ AND FROYIM

Turtle Shell Productions at the Turtle's Shell Theatre, Times Square Arts Center

Is post-Holocaust guilt now out of fashion? Are there new, juicier news events that override the past? Not so, if one judges by *Fritz and Froyim*, a clever, sardonic musical that brings the issue to life once more. Guilt, it seems, never goes out of fashion.

Collaborators Norman Beim (book and lyrics) and Mark Barkan and Rolf Barnes (music) have run with this story, based loosely on Romain Gary's *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*. Fritz, a former S.S. officer, is haunted by Froyim, a Jewish one-time comedian. The tale never reveals whether Froyim is a ghost or a figment of Fritz's troubled mind. And why is Froyim Fritz's particular doppelganger?

The fact is that Froyim, appearing first as a dummy on ventriloquist Fritz's lap, gradually emerges as Fritz's alter ego, speaking with him and through him. The vaudeville, with its jokes, shtick, and soft-shoe numbers, is juxtaposed sharply against the tragic tale, calling to mind the Pagliacci figure. Fritz's comfortable life with German colleagues who prefer to forget the past is gradually disrupted. His angered wife points out in song that a job is just a job, whether in a bakery or a concentration camp, and that he should indeed forget the past.

Director John W. Cooper has assembled a fine cast. Matthew Hardy is particularly memorable as the indestructible Froyim, with solid support work from T.J. Mannix as Fritz. Chorus members Richard B. Watson, Joan Barber, Erin Cronican, and Dennis Holland easily change characters as the story evolves through flashbacks. The colorful Tracy Stark serves as accompanist and narrator.

Beim's lyrics are a treasure, wedded to the Barkan-Barnes music. The first act shines with biting lyrics but grows bland when songs turn to nostalgia (memories of lost loves). The show inevitably slackens in these quiet, reflective moments. Still, taken as a whole, *Fritz and Froyim*, with its fresh approach to an enduring message, is a musical piece of much promise.

*Presented by Turtle Shell Productions
at the Turtle's Shell Theatre, Times Square Arts Center, 300 W. 43rd St., 4th floor, NYC.
June 1-16. Mon., 7 p.m.; Wed.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat. 3 and 8 p.m.
(212) 868-4444 or www.smarttix.com.*

Reviewed by Irene Backalenick

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