

Critics Corner

**ARTS** Music/Theater/Books/Shows

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**As we see it**

By Herbert G. Luft  
**On Stage**

**ROZA.** THE bitter-sweet musical, coming to us from Baltimore to premiere here at the Mark Taper Forum, is based on "La Vie Devant Soi" by the late *Romain Gary* and *Moshe Mizrahi's* 1977 Academy Award winning motion picture, "Madame Rosa."

We admire the workmanship that went into the unique production directed by *Harold Prince*. As designed by *Alexander Okun*, the massive set construction covers the whole of the stage, reflecting a cutout of a shabby tenement in the Belleville section of Paris, with dingy rooms, worn furniture and a warped staircase, a house crowded with garishly dressed, noisy prostitutes and an assortment of small children of multiple national origins.

*Simone Signoret*, in the screen version, reveals the anguish of an aging woman who cannot forget the past; on her deathbed she mumbles about her

deportation into the camp of Auschwitz, her Yiddish-Hebrew words becoming a muffled outcry.

On the stage *Georgia Brown* cannot show the same intensity of feeling the cinema allows in a close-up scrutinizing the human countenance. Yet, the actress-singer ("Oliver") portrays with great sincerity the emotionally charged character of Roza who collects stray children in her boundless love for the little ones who have no place to go.

Yet, comparing the current offering with the filmic epic, one cannot help but observe that the musical is all-too-cute and, at times, rather banal.

The relationship between the lonesome woman and a small Arab boy is not clearly defined. Roza dies with the hope that "Momo" will sustain her link with the world, but her fragile love is drowned here with song and dances. And Roza comes back on stage in a

curtain call to join in the joyous finale.

Among the performers, who are specific types, *Bob Gunton* scores as the transvestite *Lola*, with support from *Brian Noodt* as little *Momo*, *Marcia Lewis* as Mrs. Katz and *Neal Ben-Ari* as *Yussef Kadir*.

*Brown's* haunting performance is not much helped by the music supplied by *Gilbert Becaud*. Only two songs have the melodic flair to lift Roza and us out of misery: "Happiness" (Act I) and at the end, "Live a Little." We expected more.

✓ *Jacques Brel*... comes alive at the Back Alley Theatre as the current edition of his musical cavalcade opens, with a fresh interpretation of his life and times by *Erich Blau* and *Mort Shuman*, as conjured up from the lyrics of his compositions.

The nuances are quite different, but the underlying... Please turn to page 15



PREMIERE—Georgia Brown in the West Coast premiere of *Roza*, now at the Mark Taper Forum through June 14. "Roza" has book and lyrics by Julian More, music by Gilbert Becaud, direction by Harold Prince. Call 243-410-1462 or 714-634-1300.

**LUFT**

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ing theme remains: compassion for humanity and the hope for a better, more peaceful future.

Among our favorite songs from the pen of the Flemish composer are "Amsterdam," "Les Torres," "Marieke" and foremost "If We Only Have Love," sparkingly interpreted by *Joseph Cardinale*, *Melissa Converse*, *Michael G. Hawkins*, *Geraldine Joyce* and *Thom Keeling*. *Laura Zucker* is the producer; *Allan Miller* directs.

□ *Ian McKellen*, with his inimitable one-man show, creates immediate rapport with the audience at the Westwood Playhouse, while remaining on personal terms with Shakespeare, whom we learn to understand more fully with McKellen's witty and whimsical interpretation.

While he is reverent with the great Bard, McKellen becomes quite

sarcastic with some of the pompous actors, such as *Garrick*, who have portrayed Shakespeare's characters throughout the ages. He is deeply sincere when reciting the final lines of the dethroned *Richard II* and a scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

During a subsequent reception, McKellen told this columnist that he twice performed "Acting Shakespeare" in Jerusalem to "wonderfully enthusiastic audiences."

□ **The Importance of Being Earnest**, *Oscar Wilde's* very last play, with which he mocks both the audience and imperial England, perhaps in premonition of his own "Fall from Grace," receives a lavish treatment at the Los Angeles Theatre Center under producing director *Bill Bushnell*.

A group of polished performers recreate upper-class society at the turn of the century. *Jonathan Schmock* is true to his name as the foppish, scat-

ter-brained *Algernon*. *Diana Chesney*, an imposing actress, is *Lady Bracknell*, a sturdy pillar of Victorian morality.

Immediately after *Wilde* received a great number of curtain calls at the conclusion of "Earnest" on opening night, he was enmeshed in a sex scandal with which he could not cope.

□ **Cherry Orchard**, our favorite play from the pen of *Anton Chekhov*, the great Russian author who visualized the coming of a new order at the turn of the century, has been revived at the Ensemble Studio Theatre.

A labor of love for director *David Kaplan*, the drama has individual fine performances, but it lacks a unity of production and especially the Slavic texture and flavor.

*Joel Asher* renders an outstanding portrayal of *Lopakhin*, the ruthless upstart, offspring of slaves, who seemingly tries to even the score with his former masters.