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### Theatre in Review: *The Patsy*/Jonas (Transport Group)

You won't find an odder, more quixotic -- and, at times, more charming -- entertainment than *The Patsy*. David Greenspan, Jack Cummings III, and Kristina Corcoran Williams have dug up a hit domestic comedy from the 1925-26 Broadway season, trimmed it in half, and turned it into a performance piece for Greenspan, who embodies seven characters with the fury of one possessed.

All alone on an abstractly rendered setting designed by Dane Laffrey -- a three-sided room covered with floral wallpaper and missing any windows or doorways -- the casually attired



David Greenspan. Photo: Carol Rosegg

Greenspan attacks the script with brio, starting with the stage directions. Actually, this opening gambit is rather worrying; he describes the mundane details of the ground plan so archly, aided by so many vocal tricks, that you can be forgiven for thinking that the entire evening will be devoted to self-congratulatory camp humor.

But Greenspan is a better actor than that, and soon he is populating the stage with a lively array of characters, morphing from a teary middle-aged matron to her outraged spouse to a lively young lothario in a matter of seconds. As if infected with a benevolent form of Saint Vitus' Dance, the actor is constantly in motion, dashing up and downstage, facing right then left, and shifting instantly from high hysteria to a slow burn; many of these transitions feature a little kick-step-turn movement that signals nothing less than sheer exuberance.

What drives this peculiar enterprise -- and keeps us engaged -- is Greenspan's obvious affection for the potboilers of another theatrical era. Written by Barry Conners -- who had a number of respectable hits before decamping for Hollywood, where he died young -- *The Patsy* details the many levels of intrigue inside the middle-class Harrington family. In one corner are Mrs. Harrington and daughter Grace, a pair of determined social climbers. In the other corner are Mr.

Hamrrington, an unpretentious groceries salesman, and daughter Patricia, who carries a torch for Tony, a young real estate developer who is also Grace's cast-off beau. *The Patsy* is, basically, Cinderella in a cloche hat, as the mousy Patricia learns to fascinate Tony while fending off Grace, who is between engagements to the local rich kid.

At least in its edited form, the script is surprisingly sharp in its observations and packed with tart humor. There's a touch of Dawn Powell in the acid depiction of country-club strivers, and of young go-getters who hide their loneliness behind the slogans of the day. Greenspan is at his best in the play's quieter, more revelatory, moments -- when Tony arrives for a date with Grace, only to discover that he's been ditched, or when Patricia, haltingly and a bit shamefully, reveals that her mother never wanted her. (Tony also has a speech, depicting his heart's desire--a vision of a cottage occupied by him and a devoted spouse--which Greenspan turns into something genuinely touching.)

At other times, however, Greenspan could profitably do less. He has a real zest for the female characters, but his unbridled account of Mrs. Harrington's tearful rages are a bit grating, and he goes too far over the top in his depiction of Grace, here rendered as a harpy from hell rather than the petty, selfish fortune-hunter represented in the script.

But, most of the time, Greenspan, under Cummings' canny direction, finds a surprising amount of humor and heart in what should be, by all rights, a lifeless antique. He gets plenty of mileage from a running gag in which Patricia, aiming for social success, delves into a book titled *Wise and Witty Sayings*, baffling everyone with inappropriate remarks. ("All the world's a stage -- but most of us are only stagehands" is one of her favorites.) He makes the most of Conners' snappier wisecracks. ("I always thought husbands were like measles - you catch them or you don't catch them.") And when two lonely souls finally get together for a long-awaited kiss, he manages to present the event from both points of


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view.

In addition to Laffrey's setting, **Mark Barton's** tasteful lighting design works a number of subtle changes that quietly underline the script's most dramatic moments. **Michael Rasbury's** sound design pays tribute to the play's provenance with a number of vintage effects -- doorbells, telephones, autos -- wittily rendered with every pop and scratch from their original records. Altogether, *The Patsy* works as a vivid time capsule of old Broadway and a vehicle for the singular talents of this fine --if unclassifiable -- performer.

On certain nights, Greenspan is offering a second piece, a monologue authored by him and entitled *Jonas*. A very personal work, it's a rather strange meditation on one of the minor characters -- a servant -- in George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's *The Royal Family*. The actor played the role at Manhattan Theatre Club last season, and here he imagines Jonas as a 133-year-old man who has lived through decades of gay history. There's something endearingly obsessive about the way Greenspan has imagined the ultimate fates of all of Kaufman and Ferber's characters, right down to the housemaid, but, even at 40 minutes, it's hard to keep one's mind on the author's musings. "Is this a story or a play?" he asks at one point. Actually, it's neither. Jonas might be a stimulating piece to read at one's leisure, but, in a theatre, it's pretty deadly. For maximum amusement, see *The Patsy* and skip this.--**David Barbour**

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