

The Diary of Anne Frank



Frances Goodrich's and Albert Hackett's stage play based on the best selling book **The Diary of Anne Frank**, first premiered in 1955 at the small Cort Theatre in New York, then went on to win several awards including the Tony for Best Play, and Best Actress for its young star, the late Susan Strasberg. (Natalie Portman did the revival of it on Broadway in 1997 in a new adaptation by Wendy Kesselman). But unlike many other prestigious Tony winners, **The Diary of Anne Frank** took on an after life of its own in the regional theatres, on community theatre, high school and college stages, along with television and film productions. Internationally Anne did phenomenally well. I caught up with it in an East Berlin production (when Berlin was still a divided city) at a young people's theatre which proved to be one of the most unforgettable experiences I've ever had in the theatre.

Fifty six years after its premiere, Anne still has the power to compel, a testimony not only to the power of the story and the courage of nine people who vainly tried to escape Nazi persecution after enduring solitary confinement in a small apartment in Amsterdam for more than two years, but

because of the appeal of a young 14-year-old girl among them who still believed in the goodness of people. We need to be transported to that kind of faith, especially during these times when too many parts of the world still seems to be caught in a black hole of persecution and prejudice.

Shakespeare in Action, the Artistic Company in residence at Central Commerce Collegiate high school, is presenting **The Diary of Anne Frank** until March 13 at the Central Commerce Theatre. Under the direction of **Michael Kelly**, the artistic director of the company, **The Diary of Anne Frank** is a sterling production with a first rate cast. Even if you've seen past productions, this Anne Frank is well worth another look, especially if you have teenagers who could learn something from this important history lesson, and get to know a remarkable young Jewish girl whose courage and hope during a tragic period in time has since inspired generations.

As Anne, **Sascha Cole** is warm and vibrant, graduating from the talkative, excitable girl whose probing into everyone's affairs embarrasses her family, to the blossoming young woman, self-confident, and feeling the first blush of love. Keeping a diary was Anne's way of dealing with the frustrations of being isolated from a life she once knew, friends she once had, and the freedom to be herself. Ms. Cole grows as Anne grows (she is sixteen by the time the play ends), and so does our empathy for her, especially in one moving scene when she and the other members of the hidden household are discovered by the Nazis and led away to unimaginable horrors, disconnected from everything human and humane.

Along with Ms. Cole, there are a host of fine performances from actors who give a distinctive personality to each of the 9 people in the cramped hiding place of an office building (designed by **Glenn Davidson**) once owned by Mr. Frank. **Chris Karczmar** as Otto Frank is the backbone of the group, generous and compassionate, realizing that his strength will be the only thing that binds them together, while **Alexis Koetting's** disheartened Mrs. Frank cannot get close to her stubborn younger daughter, even to calm her nightmares. Though Anne feels inferior to her "perfect" older sister, **Kailin Janisse's** Margot, has humility and a gentleness that speaks louder than her fear of what lies ahead.

Their lives are intertwined with Mr. and Mrs. Van Daan who have gone into hiding with them; the frivolous but warm hearted Mrs. Van Daan played by **Catherine McNally**, whose fur coat has become her last symbol of the comfortable life they once had, and **Bruce Beaton's** Mr. Van Daan, a once wealthy man whose realizes how much dignity he has lost when he tries to steal some crusts of bread from the make shift kitchen.

There's nice work as well from **Cindy Block** who plays Miep, the Frank's cheerful food and message courier who tries to keep their hopes up, **Joe Bucci** as the shy Peter Van Daan , Anne's first and only boy friend, **Shaun Clarke** as the last person to be accepted in the hiding place, the self-righteous dentist Mr. Dussel who shares Anne's room, and **Dan Karpenchuk's** stalwart Mr. Kraler, who is running Mr. Frank's business for him and has helped the family move into the hiding place.

There is a coda to the story as Mr. Frank, revisits the secret hiding place after the war and finds Anne's diary. Wendy Kesselman's newer version differs from the original stage play by Goodrich and Hackett, and though I preferred the stronger ending of the older one, Kesselman's adaptation is equally moving. **The Diary of Anne Frank** finishes its performances this Sunday just as the school break is starting. It would have been nice to have it among the number of theatre events for young people during the week. You still have a chance to catch it, and I urge you to try. **The Diary of Anne Frank plays from February 23 - March 13, 2011 At Central Commerce Theatre, 570 Shaw Street. Suitable for ages 10 and up. Box Office: 416-703-4881. Reservations are essential.** For more information: www.shakespeareinaction.org
Photo: by Joel Charlebois. Sascha Cole in The Diary of Anne Frank.
(Reviewed by Jeniva Berger)