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'Mama': Sweetly Nostalgic Tone

By WALTER LAZENBY
CHARLESTON — Imagine the Waltons as a Norwegian immigrant family living in San Francisco early in this century and you will have an inkling of the tone and effects of John Van Druten's "I Remember Mama," closing Saturday night at Eastern.

Based on Kathryn Forbes's "Mama's Bank Account," the play features an authoress-narrator reminiscing about her mother, a practical, tolerant, loving, and wise character. Hence the sweetly nostalgic overall tone.

But individual incidents also are suffused with the tenderer and kindlier emotions. The audience gets to agonize with a mother over the decision to put a child's pet to sleep; to smile approval at the mother's overcoming the rigidity of hospital routine, by means of a stratagem; to witness the flowering of a romance between a would-be spinster and an undertaker.

The audience sees four children of a family growing toward career choices and adulthood. It can take delight in seeing three stuffy aunts getting their comeuppance, even though this happens in connection with a death in the family.

However, I suspect that most patrons go away from this show saying, like the narrator, "First and foremost, I re-

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member Mama."

How could one forget such an attractive character — her too-trusting nature, where eloquent actor-boarders are concerned; her deception aimed at giving the children a sense of security; her willness and spunk in helping her daughter to get a start at writing; her generosity to a woman who scandalizes her sisters?

Who can deny that Katie Sullivan gives a subtly but clearly etched interpretation of Mama — quite a switch from her role in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Perhaps her best moments are the one in which she formulates a plan to sneak into the hospital ward and see her sick daughter and the one in which she tells her oldest daughter of the death of an older brother.

Maggie Sullivan nearly steals every scene in which she appears, as Dagmar; Nancy Hunt is an impishly effective Christine; and Sal Viviano gives a smooth performance as Nels. Cathy Feltz takes

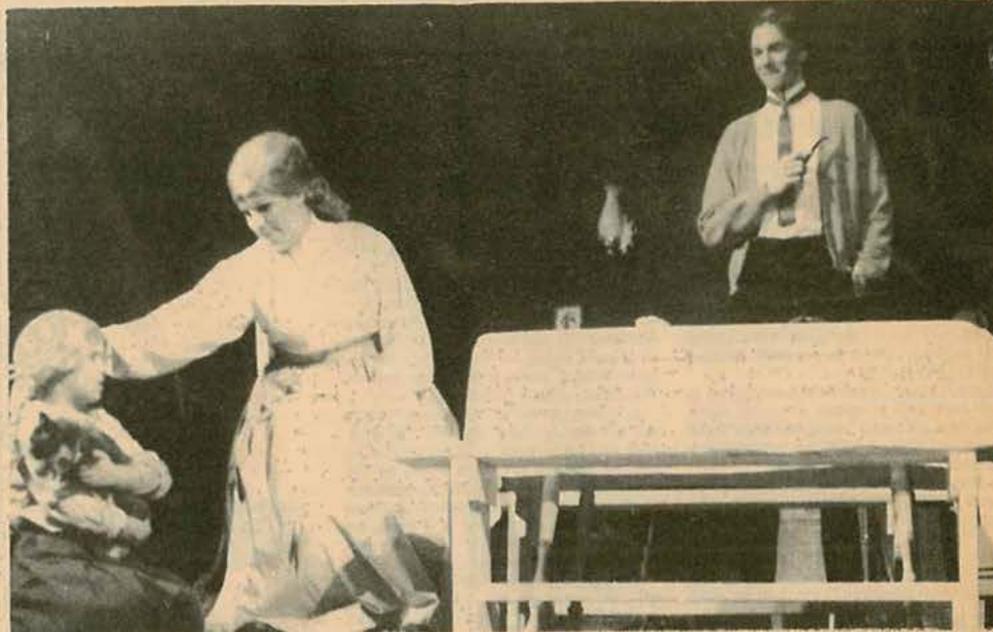


Photo by Dan Hagen

Maggie Sullivan, Katie Sullivan and Brent Krueger in 'I Remember Mama.'

the challenge of playing both the girl she is remembering and the adult doing the remembering.

Brent Krueger and Terry Kroenung manage to look almost middle-aged, and Rich Schneider gives Uncle Chris a goodly share of vocal vitality.

Gary Shrader gives a stand-out cameo performance as the undertaker.

For me, the aunts would have been more colorful and interesting if they had been less stereotypical and one-dimensional.

TANGENTIAL POINT: This is a family show in more ways than one: three

members of Director Sullivan's family tread the boards here.

NOTE PERHAPS OF INTEREST: Though not a musical, this show first appeared on Broadway under the auspices of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein as producers.