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THE LIVELY ARTS

# THE LIVELY ARTS; STAGE:THE TRIAL OF LEO FRANK

By LEAH D. FRANK

THE Arena Players Repertory Theater in East Farmingdale, which was recently decked out as a New York women's prison for "Women Behind Bars," has been converted into a Georgia courtroom for the world premiere of Jesse Waldinger's "People Versus Leo Frank."

The play examines the trial of a factory superintendent, Leo Frank, who was convicted in 1915 of murdering a 13-year-old factory worker in Atlanta. After his trial, he was lynched by a mob. Interest in the Frank case was reawakened a couple of years ago when a witness stepped forward after almost 70 years and said that Leo Frank was innocent. However, a posthumous pardon was denied.

Leo Frank was a young man from Brooklyn who saw opportunities in the South. He moved to Atlanta, married a local woman and began raising a family. He quickly worked his way up to become the superintendent of a pencil factory in which a young girl named Mary Phagan worked. After she was brutally murdered, Jim Conley, the black janitor at the factory, testified that Frank had killed the girl, then forced Conley to dispose of the body. The trial became a focal point for anti-Semitism and attracted national attention.

According to the playwright, the police, egged on by a politically ambitious prosecutor, needed a conviction to placate an outraged public. Mr. Waldinger contends that the reason that Frank was brought to trial was that during the early years of this century the only person in the South with less status than a black was a Jew from New York. The play shows slanted and inflammatory reporting in the local press, which had Frank convicted long before his sentence was passed by the judge. Anti-Semitism became so intense that many Jews fled Georgia.

Mr. Waldinger's play contains some very forceful and moving scenes. When he tells his story simply and with honesty, he is extremely effective. Much of the play concentrates on the courtroom confrontations between the contending attorneys. There is also a strain between the defense attorney and Frank, who cannot understand why his innocence is not apparent to the world and why his lawyer cannot "do more."

As the witnesses for both sides take the stand, a picture emerges of the murder of Mary Phagan and of life in Georgia around 1915.

It's when Mr. Waldinger relies on extraneous dramatic gimmicks that his play wears thin. He has

unfortunately included a folk singer whose lyrics dwell on Leo Frank's tribulations. Aside from the fact that in this production the actor cannot manage even the simplest tunes, the folksy, relaxed nature of the balladeer seems at odds with the intensity of the piece.

Also, the actors who play minor roles sit at either side of the stage, making catcalls and creating an uproar during much of the trial. Mr. Waldinger has not given these characters anti-Semitic, anti-Yankee remarks that would seem appropriate for them, and their din, rather than being an echo of the period, is merely bothersome.

Ultimately, in Mr. Waldinger's concern for Leo Frank, he fails to provide enough counterbalancing material about why or how such an injustice could occur.

Although their Southern accents are painfully inconsistent, the cast is generally first-rate. Michael Alsen, an actor who often works at the Arena Players, and who usually relies on excessive mannerisms, is here quite effective as the flamboyant prosecutor. Unfortunately, the role is a one-dimensional stereotype of a Southern politician of the old school. But Mr. Alsen does pursue it with vigor.

Philip Thron is heartbreaking as a gentle, bewildered Leo Frank, and George Anderson is totally believable as the dedicated defense attorney. Jack Philpot gives a sterling performance as two characters, one a perjuring reward-seeker and the other a toadying factory watchman.

Brian Mangum is weak as the factory janitor, Jim Conley. None of the women in the cast seem to really understand their characters, although this is probably more the fault of the direction than of the acting.

Frederic De Feis, who directs most of the work done at Arena, has directed "People Versus Leo Frank," which runs through July 8, with a practiced and capable hand. This play bravely grapples with a real-life drama of truth, justice and the American way. It also introduces us to a developing playwright with major potential. "People Versus Leo Frank" needs judicious rewriting and some redeveloping to reach its full potential, but, as it is, it's worth an evening in the theater.

photo of Phillip Thron and George Anderson in 'People Versus Leo Frank'