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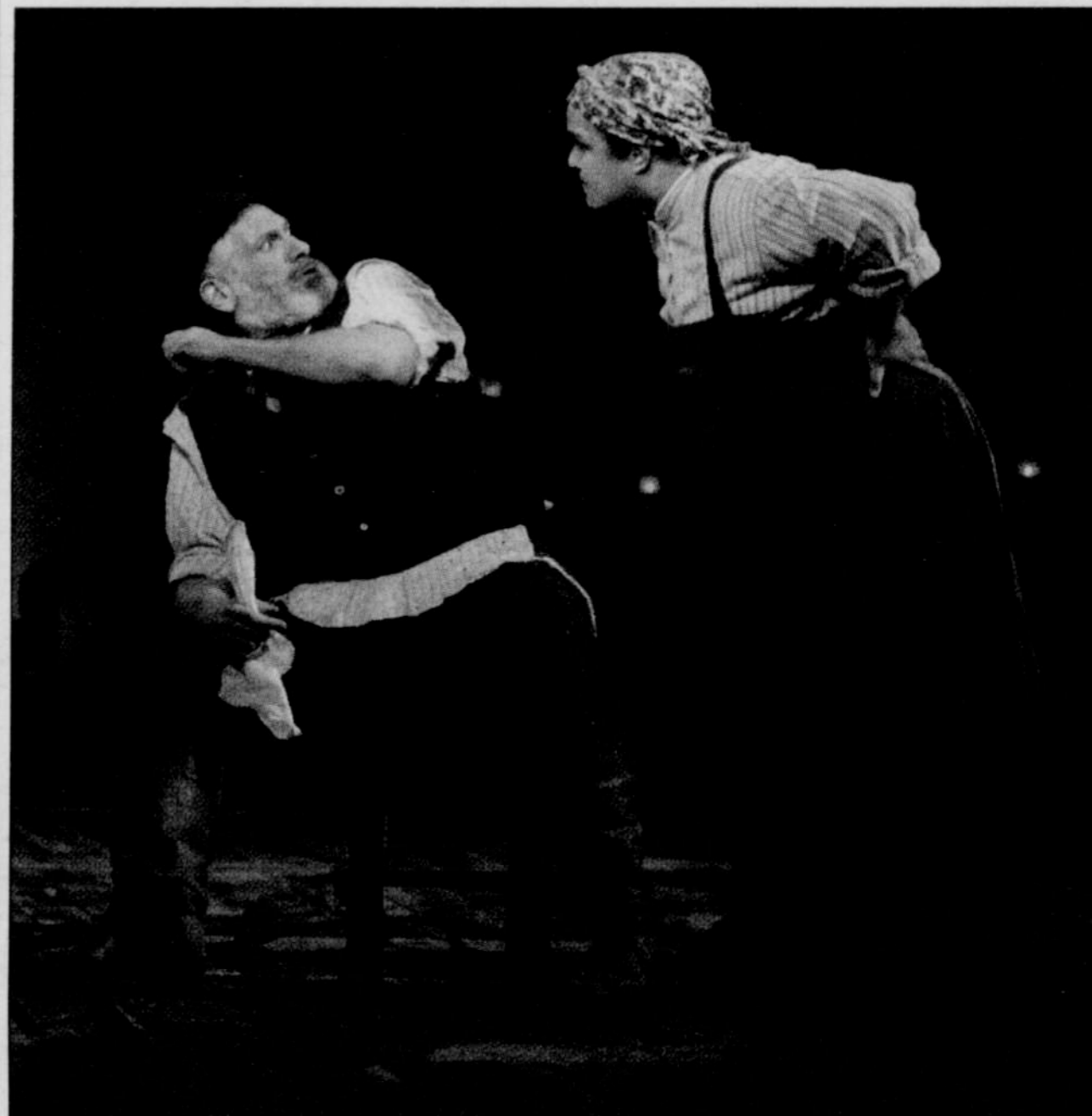
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THEATER

It's up to you, New York

Broadway season goes up in cost, down in quality

BY JON KRETZU



Gay icons Harvey Fierstein and Rosie O'Donnell promote family values in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

After two recent trips to New York City, I am sad to report that the malaise of mediocrity that has been afflicting Broadway and off-Broadway theater the past few years (OK, make that the past decade) is not showing any sign of improving. As ticket prices keep ascending, the levels of quality, ingenuity and sheer theatrical excitement keep descending. Being in New York is still a thrill, but unfortunately the charge doesn't exactly come from what is on its stages anymore.

Starting with the best, at least one could say the past season had no dearth of new musicals. Many of these shows had good intentions and attempted to be both fresh and new—they just didn't quite succeed.

The biggest artistic success of the season, judging from critics and musical aficionados, was *The Light in the Piazza*. I wanted to love this show but was defeated at every turn. The libretto (the piece was very nearly a sung-thru pop-era) was based on a 1950s short story and film that are Lifetime Television quality at best—the old overprotective-mother-learning-to-let-go-and-allow-her-daughter-who-was-kicked-in-the-head-by-a-pony-to-finally-find-love-in-picaresque-Florence-with-an-Italian-stud-muffin plot. Adam Guettel, whose brilliant score for *Floyd Collins* remains one of the most exciting musical theater works of the past 10 years, tried hard for romantic ecstasy here but was defeated by his leaden lyrics and by music that was forever yearning to soar but remained sadly earthbound.

Another one of Broadway's current crop of new age composers, William Finn, got lots of notice for the cult hit *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, but again there was a whiff of "Emperor's New Clothes" about this off-Broadway transfer to Circle in the Square. The

cast was amusing if a bit overeager, the songs mostly uninspired (especially next to Finn's masterful work on *Falsettos* and *A New Brain*) and the production wittily designed and directed. Still, it just didn't add up. Rachel Sheinkin's book was very funny at times, but did every one of these child contestants have to be pint-sized grotesques? There was something uncomfortable and demeaning about this freaks-and-geeks sideshow that somehow put a damper on the evening.

Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, based on the 1988 film starring Michael Caine and Steve Martin, was a delightful surprise—the work of some clever musical theater talents combining to create an entertaining, old-fashioned musical comedy. David Yazbek's score was both serviceable and mildly memorable, Jeffrey Lane's book very funny indeed and the work of the cast simply stellar—especially Norbert Leo Butz's hilarious Tony-winning star turn. Jack O'Brien's effortless direction gave the evening panache, and the whole show was an unexpected, somewhat guilty, pleasure.

The biggest hit of the Broadway season was undeniably *Spamalot*, the merrily mad musical version of the 1975 cult film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. This fun house of a show was filled with inspired idiocy and a wickedly sharp satiric edge. Impeccably directed by Mike Nichols and blessed with a cast of inspired clowns, *Spamalot* made the audience just plain giddy. Almost everything in the show worked, but a few performances raised the show to the pantheon of comic heights: Tim Curry's peerlessly deadpan King Arthur, David Hyde Pierce's stylish comic genius epitomized in one of Broadway's greatest (and most unexpected) 11 o'clock numbers, Hank Azaria's look of befuddlement as he is initiated into gay life as a

CAROL ROSEGG