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GERTRUDE STEIN ... Musical captures her quintessence

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Stein's 'Americans' given lyrical force

THE MAKING OF AMERICANS - Adaptation by Leon Katz of Gertrude Stein's novel, with music by Al Carmines, directed by Anne Bogart, set and costumes by Nancy Winters and Jim Buff, lighting by Carol Mullins, presented by the Music-Theater Group/Lenox Arts Center, Wednesdays through Saturdays at 9 p.m. at Citizens Hall, Stockbridge, to July 28.

By Kevin Kelly
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STOCKBRIDGE - No less than eight Gertrude Steins appear in "The Making of Americans," a musical version of Stein's celebrated novel, with the eight Steins evenly refracted between the women and men in the cast. Where Marty Martin's "Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein" gave us a three-in-one portrait (the woman, the lover, the artist), "The Making of Americans" tries instead for what might be called a shifting collage of "being". And, while deliberately allusive, it pretty much succeeds.

Published in 1925, Stein's novel traces the migration of the pseudonymous Herslands from Europe to America in the 1800s. The Herslands are the Steins, and their history is a series of incidents sprung from clear fact deliberately clotted. Conceptually the novel is an attempt to present "the continuous present" on the page. Influenced by William James and Picasso, Stein conceived "The Making of Americans" in an idiosyncratic style, hoping to perceive beyond individual "types" into a shared soul. It's a memoir like none other, at once inclusive and frustrating, fractured and whole. What is amazing here is the extent to which it has been given life - in fact, lyrical force - on the stage.

Leon Katz's cubistic libretto is lightly shadowed by Al Carmines' score (lyrics from Gertrude Stein). The narrative tone is appropriately splintered, abrupt, abrasive, then shrewdly contradicted in the almost romantic containment (and ill) of Carmines' melodies. What is perhaps more surprising is the content salvaged from the novel which, 60 years after its stylistic modernism, is all but unreadable. The image of pioneer settlers ("this history of a decent family's progress") is quickly distorted by emotions and needs, dreams and frustrations erupting into conflict and alienation. The Herslands are destroyed and they survive, a paradox developed with subliminal impact. The animosity the three Hersland children feel toward their father is rooted in pain, the pain of once having loved him.

While it's often unclear what charges one moment's shrieking rage, another's silent compassion, the point itself is crystal: It's the inescapable process of attrition that drives human beings on. Gertrude Stein wanted to prove "the meaning in my having being." One of the subtle and most telling insights in this musicalization of her work is the use of the gerundive to suggest Stein's "continuous present." The evening ends with an exultant "Wanting, Needing, Knowing, Dying."

Under the direction of Anne Bogart, the Music-Theater Group production has a sparse stylization that effectively mirrors Stein's content. There are set pictorial groupings reminiscent of understated ads in Interview magazine: the cast, casually dressed in subtle lavenders, pinks, beiges, browns, leaning against each other, or solo with an isolated chair, an umbrella. The scenery is as understated as the costumes. Both are by Nancy Winters and Jim Buff. Carol Mullins' lighting is

limited but sometimes exquisite (particularly in shadow-slanted scenes played behind a scrim). The performances are intense and expressive, sometimes too intense and too expressive. And two of the men, Henry Stram and George McGrath, are bad actors. The best work comes from Catherine Coray, Joan Scheckel, Martin Moran and Scott L. Johnson. The singing may be described as *sprechstimme*; in most cases has to be. The score is elegantly played by a quartet conducted by Jeff Halpern.

"The Making of Americans" had a limited run this spring Off-Broadway. Performed in one act (90 minutes), it somehow manages to be the quintessence of Stein. The language is mysterious, powerful, tantalizing; the music is lambent and beckoning; and together they summon the profundity speaking through Gertrude Stein (in eight voices!).