BACK STAGE WEST®
THE ACTORS WEEKLY NEWSPAPER
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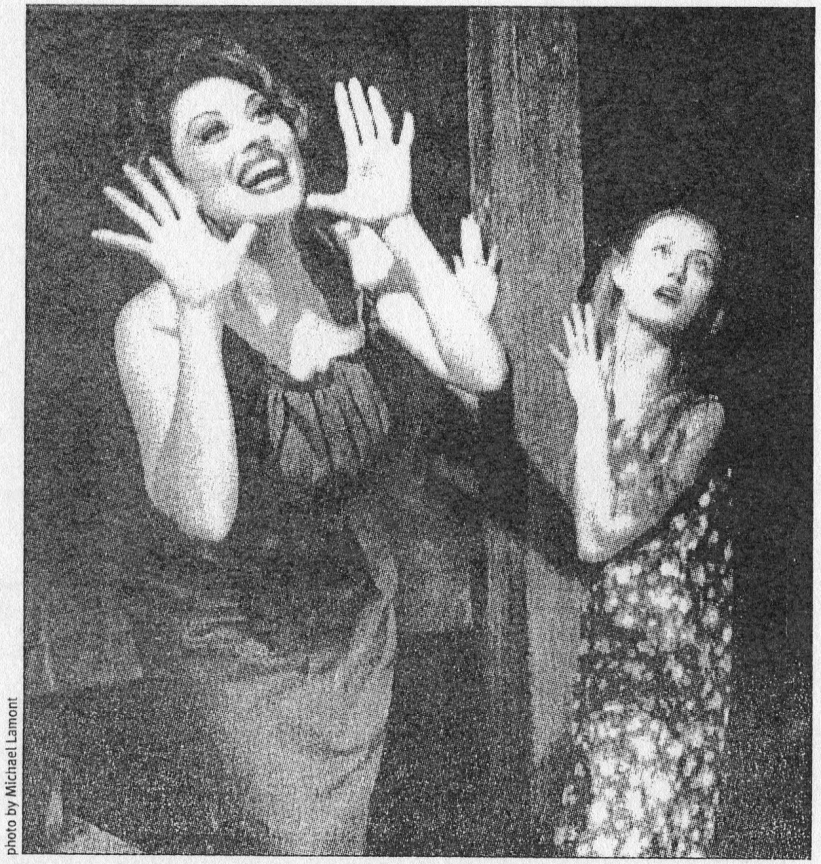

photo by Michael Lamont

Death becomes her: Lesli Margherita and Amy Rutberg in *The Grave White Way*.

THE GRAVE WHITE WAY

CRITIC'S PICK

at the Hudson Backstage Theatre

Reviewed by Brad Schreiber

With this work, Joe Patrick Ward, via his book, music, and lyrics, has raised to the pantheon of great musical theatre artists such unheralded names as Dickey Ernest and Gus Pusman. Similarly the six dead performers, waiting in purgatory for a final callback from the Lord, are only too happy to audition. You know they're too plucky to quit. They've already been in earthbound musicals like *Pretty Prison Boys*.

Ward has a terrific concept, outlandishly funny lyrics, and an irrepressible cast to glorify the nadir of imaginary musicals. It's crass, with class, as Lindsey McKenzie (Lesli Margherita) sings "My Parents Like Him So" from *Riverboat Regina*. Imagine an ultra-slatternly Gina Gershon with great, er, pipes, and oozing sexuality, abetted by director Sarah Gurfield. John Steinbeck turns over in his grave as heavenly wannabes Amanda Rothchild (Amy Rutberg), Sheldon Scott (Shannon Stoeke), and Greg Astin Cartier (Craig Curtis) belt out "The Mice, the Men, the Music, and Me" based on the author's formerly heart-rending *Of Mice and Men*.

Act Two slams more modern musical fare with pinpoint accuracy. *Jesus Christ Superstar* apparently overshadowed the somewhat less successful *Nazareth High*, although perhaps Fox TV will pick it up. *Miss Saigon* becomes *Lady Hiroshima* with the hilariously cliché-ridden "My Heart Is in My Chest," with a cooing Margherita joined by Joshua Finkel. Even the great Sondheim is not immune to Ward's fine tunes and tartly bent words. Goodbye, *Sunday in the Park With George*. Hello, *Winter in the Woods With Donner* and the even more succinct *Eat Me*.

There's a revolving door of real, honest-to-God musical guest artists at each performance of *Grave White Way*. While the final judgment of the other six is never in doubt, and a rather straight-ahead piece featuring Albert Einstein from the Broadway bomb *Relativity-ly Speaking* could have used a gray wig and German accent, Ward and ensemble could hold their own in a big-budget musical, if they weren't so perversely funny. Long live short-lived musical theatre!

"The Grave White Way," presented by Jayson Raitt, Michael Weiner, and Alan Zachary, in association with Gary Blumsack and Curtain Down Productions, at the Hudson Backstage Theatre, 6537 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m. May 3-June 17. $27.50-30. (310) 289-2999.

PATTY ONAGAN
ENTERTAINMENT