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## Gem show gives women their due

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"Respect: A Musical Journey of Women" will inevitably be compared to its predecessor at the Gem Theatre, "Menopause the Musical," which ran for a record-setting two years and nine months. So, let the comparisons start here. Both revues have casts of four women singing familiar tunes (with new words, in "Menopause"); both are about women and both have female appeal.

"Menopause" proved you could run a show forever while drawing from only half the available audience; men shunned it.

"Respect" should have broader appeal. Men won't be put off but women of a certain age aren't going to identify with it as fiercely as they did "Menopause."

"Respect" covers wider territory.

Now, let the comparisons cease. "Respect" very much stands on its own.

Conceived and written by Dorothy Marcic as she considered how much a century of American popular music had to say about American women, "Respect" uses 68 songs, in whole or in part, to illustrate its thesis that songs are "like an ink-blot test of the culture."

"Respect" has a certain intellectual tinge and supplies some terrific insights. For instance, the narration posits that the 1950s celebration of domesticity, "If I Knew You Were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake," reacted to all those women having worked men's jobs during World War II.

Mostly, though, "Respect" is unadulterated, affirmative fun. Director Hinton Battle keeps the pace lively, the dazzle at a pleasing level and lets each singer have her moments. Shonka Dukureh, Sara Madej, Marlyn Sanchez and Kelly Shook shine individually and harmonize nicely.

Battle chose the songs that got full treatments and those that are sung in parts, and his judgment proves excellent. Several ensemble numbers are knockouts, particularly "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," the civil rights anthem "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" and an over-the-top version of "Stand By Your Man." Besides solid vocals and fine accompaniment, "Respect" has some very clever visual touches. There is a costume change that surprises, and some witty use of projected images.

As "Respect's" journey progresses, we glimpse women objectified, women treated poorly, women rebellious, women in love, women ambivalent, women strong and valiant and women having a really good time. Most likely, audiences will, too.

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