

The New York Times

THEATER REVIEW

'Mad Men' Era Women: Their Tale

'The Best of Everything,' Based on Rona Jaffe's Novel

By **BEN BRANTLEY**



PHOTO: SARA KRULWICH

Though you couldn't tell it from the delighted expressions of the women they're dancing with, the men at the Christmas office party are real stiffs. Sure, they're tall, dark and kind of handsome, if your tastes run to buttoned-down, Scotch-scented swagger.

But let's face it, they're so much alike they could have rolled off an assembly line. They might as well be made of cardboard. Wait a minute. They *are* made of cardboard.

It seems fitting, as well as economical, that the male extras in the disarming new stage adaptation of [Rona Jaffe's](#) "Best of Everything" should be giant paper dolls. That's how guys often looked to the hopeful secretaries in the 1950s Manhattan of Jaffe's best-selling [novel](#) of a half-century ago: flat, unbending, interchangeable and, alas, an essential possession if you wanted to keep up with the other girls.

What with the cultural ascendancy of ["Mad Men,"](#) and recent Broadway revivals of ["Promises, Promises"](#) and ["How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying,"](#) we haven't lacked of late for vintage reminders of sexism in the office. But Jaffe's 1958 novel told the story from a gimlet-eyed female perspective that today seems less quaint than you might have expected.

When I heard that "The Best of Everything" was being made into a work of downtown theater, at [Here](#) through Oct. 20, I expected an over-the-top camp fest, replete with female impersonators of all genders. Hadn't the luscious [1959 movie version](#) featured Joan Crawford as a loveless publishing boss and the mannequin deluxe [Suzy Parker](#) as an obsessive, man-stalking actress?

To my surprised pleasure, the 95WordsPerMinute production of "The Best of Everything," adapted and directed by Julie Kramer, is neither a delirious sendup nor a mordant, finger-wagging deconstruction. It's a respectful, hysteria-free, streamlined (at 90 minutes) and appealingly modest effort that lets Jaffe's working girls speak for themselves.

What they have to say isn't, in some ways, all that different from what the women

of “Sex and the City” and even Lena Dunham’s [“Girls”](#) would be saying decades later. (In an interview in The New York Times with Ruth La Ferla in 2005, Jaffe [described “Best”](#) as “[‘Sex and the City’](#) without the vibrators.”)

Like the more contemporary women of “Sex and the City,” Jaffe’s female characters perceive an unfathomable gender gap dividing them from those perplexing but necessary beings called men. This is true even of her independent-minded heroine, Caroline, who rises quickly from the typing pool at Shalimar Publishing and to whom everyone always seems to be saying, with more astonishment than admiration, “You’re so ambitious.”

Ms. Kramer, who developed her adaptation with Amy Wilson (who also plays the Joan Crawford part here), is working with a mostly female cast, led with brisk expertise and visible intelligence by Sarah Wilson as Caroline. (There are exactly two men, Jordan Geiger and Tom O’Keefe, in the ensemble, and Mr. O’Keefe wittily embodies four separate love interests.)

The cast members are kept on a naturalistic rein that’s relaxed enough to allow for the occasional loopy comic flourish. They wear Daniel Uribe’s confining period costumes as if they put them on every morning. None of them are allowed to condescend to their characters, even when they’re swooning with envy over a best friend’s engagement ring, speculating on a future in a shared double bed or gossiping cattily about interoffice affairs.

That’s, you know, aaaaaairrs. Jaffe’s original novel was notoriously straightforward about sex, from messy foreplay to messier aftermath (including

abortions), and its abuses by men in power, which more or less meant all men in those days. The more lurid moments are presented here with neither a wink nor heavy breathing.

A calm lucidity, both amused and a tad sorrowful, prevails in all aspects of the production. Lauren Helpert's single multiplatform set and Graham Kindred's lighting suggest the workplace as a sort of sociological laboratory.

There are a few antic touches in addition to the cardboard dancing partners: a toy-size model of an ocean liner to evoke Caroline's lost love, a couple of musical interludes (including a torchy number performed by Hayley Treider as the obsessive actress) and a sly, inspired dream sequence that involves an exchange of headwear between a man and a woman. There is also, of course, a 1950s soundtrack, in which period vocalists like [Jo Stafford](#) and Doris Day sing of love, loss and matrimony.

But this production doesn't call deliberate attention to these elements. The whole show is refreshingly free of the "aren't-we-clever" self-consciousness that often accompanies such excursions into pop-culture past.

"The Best of Everything" is part of Here's Sublet Series, which allows artists to develop and perform work, at a discount. So don't expect high gloss from this production. The lack of it may in fact be a blessing.

For there is a welcome humility at work here, which in turn creates a feeling of unvarnished transparency. This approach gently and divertingly reminds us that

while Jaffe's popular novel may not have been a major work of art (and she never claimed it was), it focused a clear and abidingly useful gaze on women caught in a moment in time that isn't as distant as you might suppose.

The Best of Everything

Adapted and directed by Julie Kramer, based on the book by Rona Jaffe; developed with Amy Wilson; sets by Lauren Helpert; lighting by Graham Kindred; costumes by Daniel Urlic; sound by Jill B C Du Boff ; production stage manager, Katharine Whitney; general manger, Leah Michalos; associate producer, Holly Rosen Fink. Presented by Hyde Park & Lafayette and 95WordsPerMinute. At Here, 145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominick Street, South Village; (212) 352-3101; here.org. Through Oct. 20. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Jordan Geiger (Eddie), Sas Goldberg (Brenda), Molly Lloyd (Mary Agnes), Tom O'Keefe (Mike Rice/Shalimar/David/Ronnie), Alicia Sable (April), Hayley Treider (Gregg), Amy Wilson (Miss Farrow) and Sarah Wilson (Caroline).



THE NEW YORKER

Girls Before “Girls”

Posted by *Robert Gottlieb*

October 22, 2012

The first best-selling novel I ever edited was Rona Jaffe’s notorious “The Best of Everything.” That was back in 1958, and it’s just made a comeback—as the basis of a slick and even touching stage version at a small downtown theatre. Who’d have thunk it? Not even Rona (alas, dead), despite her literary aspirations.

Why does it work as well as it does? Is it the pre-Mad Men retro effect—the up-to-the-moment typewriters and telephones of the “girls” at the publishing house, with their little hats and white gloves, their worries over their virginity? I don’t think so, although that’s all fun for those of us with long memories. It works because it’s yet another incarnation of a basic plot that never seems to fail: three, or four, or five very young women land up in New York, trying to find their way. Will it be career? Marriage? Will they find Mr. Right or Mr. Wrong, or no Mister at all? (Rona answered the question herself in her best book, “Mr. Right Is Dead.”)

We don’t know yet how things will work out for the girls of “Girls,” today’s version of this story, but if it follows tradition, at least one of them will rise to the professional top, having sacrificed True Love; one will marry the nice guy next door and settle down to domestic contentment, if not bliss; and the one who Went Bad will die tragically—in the old days, of alcohol or a car crash or suicide, perhaps today of a transmitted social disease. Maybe—and I’ll believe it when I see it—today’s young women will be allowed to have it all. But it didn’t work that way for the most recent generation of TV gals, the “Sex and the City” gang. (Lena Dunham, the heart, soul, and body of

“Girls,” tells us that “Sex and the City” is one of her inspirations.) Yes, manners and morals change—the up-front, affectless sex of “Girls” would have been as unimaginable fifty-odd years ago as our having a black President—but life follows the same old patterns. Young women today, as in the fifties, find themselves entering the big world and having to make choices.

And this scenario wasn’t by any means invented in 1958. As far back as the twenties they were churning this stuff out. In “Sally, Irene and Mary” (1925), one girl gets the money, one gets the nice guy, one dies the death—that’s Joan Crawford, of course. In “Three on a Match” (1932), bad-girl Joan Blondell straightens out and scores the good life; Ann Dvorak goes wrong and dies—but only because she flings herself from the window to save her kidnapped little boy from gangsters (she’s scrawled his whereabouts on her nightgown with lipstick); and Bette Davis, at the very start of her career, is just a stenographer who goes on typing. In “Ladies in Love” (1936), Constance Bennett marries big money but misses out on love; Janet Gaynor finds doctor Don Ameche *and* love; and Loretta Young is dumped by gorgeous Tyrone Power and tries to commit suicide. (She ends up with her own little hat shop.) It’s Budapest, not New York, but you’d never know it.

These movies were all pure Hollywood hokum. “The Best of Everything,” however, was taken from life. Rona’s best friend at Radcliffe was a terrific girl named Phyllis who came to work at Simon & Schuster the same day I did—July 5, 1955—and for the same man, the top editor. She was his secretary and I was his editorial assistant, but she got ten dollars a week more than I did because she could take dictation and handle his checkbook, whereas all I could do was read. (Not the kind of sexism we identify with the fifties.) Phyl was a kind of Jewish Audrey Hepburn, adored by all, and when Rona, who had worked at Fawcett Publications, decided to try her hand at fiction, she naturally brought it to her old friend.

Meanwhile, our boss had made a deal with the famous Hollywood producer Jerry Wald to find properties for him. Jerry commissioned the novel, Rona wrote it, I edited it, and Phyllis provided a lot of the plotline—she was one of the sources of the central character, Caroline Bender, who loses her Harvard fiancé to a rich girl from Dallas and goes on to replace her boss (Joan Crawford—still at it—in Jerry Wald’s film) as chief editor of Fabian books. Phyl was also part-inspiration for Gregg Adams, so besotted with a Broadway producer that she stalks him and eventually plunges down the

staircase outside his apartment to her death. She was definitely *not* a source for April Morrison, the girl from the sticks who can't take the New York fast life and ends up going back to Colorado with a nice simple guy who worships her. And she never could have qualified for a Lena Dunham character—she was far too fastidious.

Phyllis and I stayed close friends for forty years, until she died of cancer. Her friendship with Rona disintegrated when Rona's widowed father married Phyllis's widowed mother. (Are we inside a Rona Jaffe novel?) Phyllis spent her life in a kind of modern version of Fannie Hurst's famous "Back Street"—devoting herself to several very distinguished married men who were crazy about her but couldn't or wouldn't marry her. She didn't really care, though—she had a lively career in publishing, she had her cats, and she had pluck. Caroline Bender, in the stage version of Rona's novel, says a resounding "No" when her ex-flame asks her to return to Dallas with him and be his... mistress! Phyllis didn't think of herself as a mistress: she may have been living a "Back Street" kind of life, but she never took the backseat. And she's had a life after death, not only as a model for Caroline and Gregg but as the heroine of "Mr. Right is Dead."

Of all the people involved with "The Best of Everything," I guess I'm the only survivor. How unsettling it was for me the other evening, how moving, to see my old friend being impersonated up on the stage—and by an actress who actually resembled her and got just about everything right. The one thing that Rona left out (and "Girls" does, too) is how much fun we all had at work, Phyllis most of all. She should have been there at the theatre with me—she would have been very pleased.

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/10/girls-before-girls-on-editing-the-best-of-everything.html>

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ON THE SHELF

The Mo Yan Culture Experience Zone, and Other News


October 23, 2012 | by [Sadie Stein](#)



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The Best Of Everything

Critic Reviews (6)

Median Grade

A

6 Reviews

From the novel by: Rona Jaffe. Adapted and directed by: Julie Kramer.

Synopsis

In the pre-women's liberation era, five young and impressionable secretaries new to the big city dodge the garter-snappers at Fabian Publishing while seeking thrilling careers, gay adventures, and a nice boy to take them out to dinner.

Critical Snapshot

By Linda Buchwald, StageGrade

Critics praise adapter/director Julie Kramer for avoiding camp and parody and instead presenting a fairly earnest adaptation of *The Best of Everything*. Most critics like bits of staging, such as using cardboard cut-outs for male extras and having one man (Tom O'Keefe) play most of the male characters, but the *New York Post's* Elisabeth Vincentelli thinks this move doesn't give the women strong enough foils to play against.

A

Sandy MacDonald, *TheaterMania*

Other than Caroline's ex-fiance Eddie, a dreamboat/cad played with oblivious entitlement by Jordan Geiger, the various men who figure in the story -- as bosses, pursuers, and often both -- are all portrayed with subtle variations by Tom O'Keefe. It's a casting concept that works brilliantly because, personal

quirks aside, these men are interchangeable in the way they pursue and inevitably discard this fresh haul of romance-minded recruits. Abetted by Lauren Helpern's sleek and adaptable modernist set, Danuel Uriel's flawless period costuming, and sound designer Jill BC Du Boff's arcane interstitial '50s pop selections, *The Best of Everything* nimbly lives up to its title.

A

Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

When I heard that “*The Best of Everything*” was being made into a work of downtown theater, at Here through Oct. 20, I expected an over-the-top camp fest, replete with female impersonators of all genders. Hadn’t the luscious 1959 movie version featured Joan Crawford as a loveless publishing boss and the mannequin deluxe Suzy Parker as an obsessive, man-stalking actress? To my surprised pleasure, the 95WordsPerMinute production of “*The Best of Everything*,” adapted and directed by Julie Kramer, is neither a delirious sendup nor a mordant, finger-wagging deconstruction. It’s a respectful, hysteria-free, streamlined (at 90 minutes) and appealingly modest effort that lets Jaffe’s working girls speak for themselves.

A

David Sheward, *Backstage*

There’s always the danger of imitation when a famous film is translated to the stage, but that pitfall is expertly avoided here. The movie drips with melodrama and today is little more than a campy hoot featuring Crawford at her most bitchy, but in this neatly packaged stage version, Kramer offers only a hint of parody. (For instance, at the office Christmas party the steno pool dances with male cardboard cutouts—indicating that their prospective boyfriends are identical and flat.) The director mostly presents the material without irony, so what emerges is an unflinching portrait of the sexual mores of the late 1950s in ultra-sophisticated Manhattan. Through this unfiltered perspective on the past, we see how women’s lives have altered in the ensuing decades, yet that they are still held to different standards than their male counterparts.

A

Mary Notari, Nytheatre.com

Everything about this show is impeccable. What first stands out is the design - and by design I don't just mean the set, but also the sound, costume, sound, and lighting and how they all fit together seamlessly with the actors and some truly imaginative staging. It is wonderfully mid-century in its look and feel - as are the characters and the dialogue of course. From the moment our heroine waves goodbye to her little toy boat - a talisman she carries with her throughout the years, hidden amongst her files and manuscripts at Fabian Publishing - the show is sincere.

B+

Adam Feldman, *Time Out New York*

Since Caroline is a bit of a stiff, most of the show's fun comes from the more lurid supporting characters: farm girl April (the cherubic Alicia Sable, bursting like popcorn), whose naïveté gets her into trouble, and glamour girl Gregg (Hayley Treider), who goes from loose to unscrewed. Notwithstanding Kramer's barbed new ending, *The Best of Everything* doesn't go very deep, but \$18 is a bargain fare for this stylish antinostalgia trip. And as Caroline learns, you can't necessarily have it all.

<http://www.stagegrade.com/productions/1113>



The Best of Everything Until Sat Oct 20

[HERE](#) 145 Sixth Ave, New York Plays & Shows

Critic's Pick

Time Out rating:



Fri Oct 5 2012

Five different people in *The Best of Everything* refer to the play's main character, Caroline (the poised Sarah Wilson), as "ambitious." Like Brutus, they don't quite mean it as a compliment. It is the early 1950s, and our heroine—a recent Radcliffe graduate who's smarting from a broken engagement with a feckless bounder (Jordan Geiger)—has taken a job as a secretary at Fabian Publishing. The company squeezes out titillating pulp novels, but its steno pool is suffused with the chlorine of conventional sexual wisdom. "There are only two ways to live, the right way and the wrong way," advises the office gossip (Molly Lloyd). The right way leads to a husband, but the wrong way means despair: loneliness, humiliation, abortion, even death.

Adapted from Rona Jaffe's best-selling 1958 book, Julie Kramer's stage play takes a knowing, lightly ironical approach to Jaffe's pre-liberation depiction of

single ladies in the big city. It's Stage Door in a Mad Men world, with a jigger of Peyton Place, and Kramer treats its soapiness like a bubble bath whose froth conceals some pretty dirty water. The men in the story are mostly cads—handsy bosses, careless wolves—and the exception, Mike (Tom O'Keefe), is a drunk; Caroline's only female role model at work is the rigid, defensive Miss Farrow. (Amy Wilson plays her with a hint of the honeyed chill that Joan Crawford brought to the 1959 film version.) Since Caroline is a bit of a stiff, most of the show's fun comes from the more lurid supporting characters: farm girl April (the cherubic Alicia Sable, bursting like popcorn), whose naïveté gets her into trouble, and glamour girl Gregg (Hayley Treider), who goes from loose to unscrewed. Notwithstanding Kramer's barbed new ending, *The Best of Everything* doesn't go very deep, but \$18 is a bargain fare for this stylish antinostalgia trip. And as Caroline learns, you can't necessarily have it all. —Adam Feldman



The Best of Everything

nytheatre.com

reviewed by Mary Notari · October 2, 2012

The Best of Everything had me at hello – or, as it was in this case, goodbye. The show opens with a stylized piece of exposition that involves a toy boat leaving from an imaginary dock and sets the stage for a captivating production on a surprisingly relevant set of mid-century American office furniture.

Everything about this show is impeccable. What first stands out is the design - and by design I don't just mean the set, but also the sound, costume, sound, and lighting and how they all fit together seamlessly with the actors and some truly imaginative staging. It is wonderfully mid-century in its look and feel – as are the characters and the dialogue of course. From the moment our heroine waves good bye to her little toy boat – a talisman she carries with her throughout the years, hidden amongst her files and manuscripts at Fabian Publishing – the show is sincere.

It would be so tempting, judging from the source material, to veer into camp with this production. But the superb acting across the board not only avoids caricature and self-awareness (*Ha-ha, look we're in the 50's!*), but brings out the humanity in every character. Grounding the audience from the very start and carrying us through the whirlwind of her life on her perfectly tailored shoulders is Sarah Wilson as Caroline. Alicia Sable's astounding journey as Caroline's best friend, April, was also a joy to watch. This play has all the archetypes of an office (the gossip, the old maid, the tragic romantic, the smart aleck) and yet every inch of these women is human and nuanced. The cast's performances made the increasing melodrama of their lives – or in some cases the increasing drudgery – anything but. Especially noteworthy was Tom O'Keefe's turn as *every male in New York City* – minus a few cardboard cut-outs – who bounded onto the stage after every quick change a fully formed new man. (Speaking of cardboard

cut-outs, you're going to love the office party dance number.)

Full disclosure: I came into *The Best of Everything* skeptical. Can women really have it all? I say: who the hell cares? Marriage doesn't define me and, like others in the feminist/queer/ally community, I am deeply skeptical that all this recent fighting over marriage rights is the right conversation to be having about the fact that many Americans are effectively second-class citizens – including women. We're still fighting those 1950's gender norms and expectations, aren't we folks?

That said: Props to director/playwright Julie Kramer and her collaborator, Amy Wilson. This show is 100% aware of that. Rather than saying all men are the same, Mr. O'Keefe's characters and those cut-outs were a manifestation of the world that women have to create for themselves when they are excluded. A world embraced by Mary Agnes and Brenda, the office gossips; a world that is rejected by Miss Farrow, the successful but unmarried sole female editor; and a world that Caroline tries to straddle with varying success.

Not to be overlooked is some very precise direction that keeps the flow seamless in what could easily be a disjointed, campy series of vignettes. Kudos to sound designer Jill BC De Boff, as well, for keeping the momentum up during some potentially tricky scene changes – how can I get a copy of that soundtrack?

Rather than comment on the norms of a bygone era, *The Best of Everything* invites us into the world of typewriters and sexual harassment and by the end I'm left asking the same questions as our grandmothers: can anyone, man or woman, find both fulfillment and love? We're still looking for those answers at the end of the show (perhaps we haven't come as far as we think from those days). Will our heroes and heroines find the best of everything like Caroline's man-child fiancé (Jordan Geiger) wishes her from the start without knowing what he's saying? Within the frame of this story we won't know. All we can hope for, as Caroline tells Mike Rice, an editor at Fabian Publishing, during a particularly hopeful moment, is to find someone conventional we can be unconventional with. In the end, we're left only with our legacy be it our work, our families, or our bonds of friendship and camaraderie.

<http://www.nytheatre.com/NytheatreNow/ReviewNyte/2012-the-best-of-everything-mary-notari>



The Best of Everything

This clever adaptation of Rona Jaffe's novel about secretaries in the 1950s is an absolute treat.

By [Sandy MacDonald](#) • Oct 5, 2012 • New York City

The light and clever hand of adapter/director Julie Kramer guides the new stage version of Rona Jaffe's scandalous 1958 novel *The Best of Everything*, now at [HERE](#).

This fairly faithful redaction of Jaffe's frank study (for its day) of young women navigating the choppy waters of a New York City paperback publishing house provides a panorama of outmoded mores as poignant as they are laughable. The result, however, is an absolute treat for the audience, as we get to snigger at the backwards ways of our female forebears, while being skillfully nudged into genuine empathy for their travails.

Fresh out of Radcliffe and recuperating from a broken engagement (the script starts with a playful flashback featuring a miniature ocean liner), the bright, impeccably groomed Caroline (Sarah Wilson) aims higher than her officemates: the yenta-ish Mary Agnes (Molly Lloyd, got up like a goofy Lynda Barry cartoon), naïve sex-kitten April (delightful Alicia Sable), bridge-and-tunnel-bred Brenda (Sas Goldberg), and junior vamp Gregg (Hayley Treider).

These young women – some ambitious, some just biding their time until marriage – can aspire no higher than the steno pool as the editorial ranks are closed to females. There is one token exception: the no-nonsense Miss Farrow (Amy Wilson), who is considered a dried-up crone at 36.

Wilson has big shoulder pads to fill – taking on the role essayed by Joan

Crawford in the 1959 film version – and she does so with quiet, grim authority, her mouth a pinched line beneath the hat that Miss Farrow wears at all times to distinguish herself from the low-status female drones.

Other than Caroline's ex-fiance Eddie, a dreamboat/cad played with oblivious entitlement by Jordan Geiger, the various men who figure in the story -- as bosses, pursuers, and often both -- are all portrayed with subtle variations by Tom O'Keefe. It's a casting concept that works brilliantly because, personal quirks aside, these men are interchangeable in the way they pursue and inevitably discard this fresh haul of romance-minded recruits.

Abetted by Lauren Helpern's sleek and adaptable modernist set, Danuel Uriel's flawless period costuming, and sound designer Jill BC Du Boff's arcane interstitial '50s pop selections, *The Best of Everything* nimbly lives up to its title.

http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/10-2012/the-best-of-everything_63143.html?cid=homepage_news



The Best of Everything' Recreates Pre-'Mad Men' Battle of the Sexes

By David Sheward | Posted Oct. 4, 2012, 8:31 p.m.

You might expect any stage version of a Joan Crawford film to be a satire in the style of Charles Busch, with a fabulous drag performer in the Crawford role. Adaptor-director Julie Kramer, however, opts for a more straightforward staging of “The Best of Everything,” Rona Jaffe’s best-selling 1958 novel about young women seeking love and careers while they toil as secretaries at a paperback publishing firm. Kramer adheres more closely to the book than 1959’s Technicolor movie adaptation. Long before “Valley of the Dolls” and “Sex in the City,” Jaffe’s novel was something of a sensation because it honestly portrayed the sex lives of ambitious career girls, not all of whom saw marriage as their ultimate goal.

There’s always the danger of imitation when a famous film is translated to the stage, but that pitfall is expertly avoided here. The movie drips with melodrama and today is little more than a campy hoot featuring Crawford at her most bitchy, but in this neatly packaged stage version, Kramer offers only a hint of parody. (For instance, at the office Christmas party the steno pool dances with male cardboard cutouts—indicating that their prospective boyfriends are identical and flat.) The director mostly presents the material without irony, so what emerges is an unflinching portrait of the sexual mores of the late 1950s in ultra-sophisticated Manhattan. Through this unfiltered perspective on the

past, we see how women's lives have altered in the ensuing decades, yet that they are still held to different standards than their male counterparts.

The Crawford part, Miss Farrow, a ruthless editor carrying on an affair with a married executive in the company, is memorable but not the lead. The focus is on Caroline, a Radcliffe grad who is recovering from a broken romance and seeking to climb the corporate ladder along with the men; she won't settle for being a secretary or a discarded plaything. There's also needy and naïve April, gossipy Mary Agnes, flamboyant and unstable Gregg, and sarcastic Brenda. Rather than treat them as punchlines, the actors and Kramer present these characters as real women dealing with the constraints of their time.

Sarah Wilson seriously conveys Caroline's conflict between her heart and her job. Alicia Sable is a charming and sweet April. As the neurotic Gregg, Hayley Treider actually improves upon the wooden performance of the movie's Suzy Parker (the supermodel of her day). There's not a whiff of over-the-top Crawford in Amy Wilson's precise Miss Farrow; Molly Lloyd and Sas Goldberg are screamingly funny as the bickering Mary Agnes and Brenda, respectively; and Tom O'Keefe (who plays four roles) and Jordan Geiger are stalwart as the men who either use or woo the heroines.

The era is recreated with accuracy and detail through Daniel Urlic's stylish costumes and Lauren Helpert's economical, corporate set. Sound designer Jill BC Du Boff's soundtrack of period pop tunes, from the likes of Dinah Washington and Doris Day, evokes the romantic dreams of Caroline and her cohorts.

Presented by Hyde Park & Lafayette and 95WordsPerMinute at HERE Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., NYC. Oct. 4–20. (212) 352-3101 or www.here.org. Casting by Paul Davis/Calleri Casting.

<http://www.backstage.com/review/ny-theater/off-off-broadway/best-everything-here-arts-center/>

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Fern Siegel

Deputy Editor, MediaPost

Stage Door:

The Best of Everything

Posted: 10/05/2012 2:47 pm

Mad Men made 21st-century audiences keenly aware of the rampant sexism and alcoholism that were an ordinary part of office life. With notable exceptions, the viewpoint is primarily male. Seven years before *Mad Men* begins, *The Best of Everything*, now at the Here Theater in SoHo, profiles the world of women. And it ain't pretty.

What seems campy now -- the crazed obsession with marriage, the stereotypes of working women, epitomized by Miss Farrow (Amy Wilson) - - was serious then. But thanks to Julie Kramer's streamlined adaptation, the tight production zips through Rona Jaffe's book, giving audiences a peek at the mind-set of post-war American women.

Plus, it adds a key ingredient: humor.

The Best of Everything is a fictionalized account of Jaffe's time as an associate editor at Fawcett in the early 1950s. The thinly veiled Fabian Publishing is the backdrop to the story of five secretaries. Most of the young women, like Mary Agnes (Molly Lloyd) and Brenda (Sas Goldberg), are marking time until their wedding day.

They cannot conceive of a life in which women long for careers. Conversely, Caroline (Sarah Wilson) a Radcliffe grad who dreams of becoming an editor, Gregg (Hayley Treider), an actress tormented by love gone wrong, and wide-eyed April (Alicia Sable) embrace a wider world. It may be heartbreaking at times, but also liberating as they search for meaning beyond stifling convention.

The Best of Everything is clearly an ironic title, but its pre-feminist world is eye-opening. This off-Broadway production is smart and entertaining. That's thanks to spot-on costumes and sets by Daniel Urlie and Lauren Helpert, respectively, aided by Kramer's economic and lively direction. Her strong cast mines both the pathos and embryonic possibilities of the era. Sable is a versatile performer, while Lloyd and Goldberg have fun with their roles. Treider is touching, and a poised Wilson does well as a woman embracing her own destiny.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mobileweb/fern-siegel/stage-door-the-best-of-ev_b_1943399.html?utm_hp_ref=theatre

Reviews Off-Broadway

Thursday, October 4, 2012

The Best Of Everything: An Eye-opening (and enjoyable) Trip to the 1950s

The 1950s doesn't seem that long ago, most of the time. The play **The Best of Everything** is based on Ronna Jaffe's 1950s book and it looks at the period through a unique lens. This theatrical adaptation is produced with the permission of The Rona Jaffe Foundation. Ms. Jaffe was quoted as saying, "Back then, people didn't talk about not being a virgin. They didn't talk about going out with married men. They didn't talk about abortion. They didn't talk about sexual harassment, which had no name in those days. I thought if I could help one young woman sitting in her tiny apartment thinking she was all alone and a bad girl, then the book would be worthwhile."

The Best of Everything certainly does talk about those things, in a frank way that shocks even some of the characters who say the lines. The story follows Caroline (played to perfection by Sarah Wilson) as she moves from jilted fiancée, to secretarial pool, to Female Editor (there is only one). Along the way, she and the other secretaries aim for love or marriage, rarely both. She is told early that there are only two kinds of women in the office, the ones looking for husbands or the "ambitious" ones – who are ready to backstab other women to get ahead.

Caroline, however, loves her job, editing and being a reader. She falls into the ambitious category without the backstabbing; but not without heartache. Caroline slowly explores emotional and then sexual maturity without a husband in the 1950s. It is a difficult road, and one without guideposts or mentors. Ms. Wilson pulls the audience along with her as she tests the limits of the time and of herself.

Two of her friends, innocent April (a perky and believable Alicia Sable) and sultry Gregg (Hayley Teirder doing good job with the most dated character) don't follow the traditional path - dating, marriage, and, only then, sex. It has bad consequences for both women. Although, for April at least, she is able to turn her life back around. The idea that you could be a loose woman, and then later become respectable was new and groundbreaking.

Two of the other secretaries, Mary Agnes (a terrific Molly Lloyd) and Brenda (a hilarious Sas Goldberg) do get married and leave the office. **The Best of Everything** shows a microcosm of women's choices in the 1950s. Ultimately, you probably couldn't have the best of *Everything*, but you could have the best of *some things*.

Tom O'Keefe plays nearly all the male parts excellently, bringing to life a couple of key moments. The other man, the jilting fiancé, is well played by Jordan Geiger. Amy Wilson under plays Miss Farrow nicely. If you only know Miss Farrow from the movie with Joan Crawford, you will be surprised to see Ms. Wilson doing an excellent job of being a terror without sucking up all the oxygen in the room.

The show was adapted from the book and directed by Julie Kramer. She has done an excellent job, moving the story along but keeping the audience invested in the characters. Finally I have to give a huge credit to Daniel Urlie, whose costumes set the period perfectly. It is a little thing, but when costuming is done badly it pulls the audience out of the moment, Mr. Urlie did a great job.

The **Best of Everything** is one of the rare shows that is funny, entertaining and still shows you something new.

The Best of Everything

Book: **Rona Jaffe**

Adaptation: **Julie Kramer**

Development: **Amy Wilson**

Direction: **Julie Kramer**

Cast: **Sarah Wilson, Jordan Geiger, Sas Goldberg, Molly Lloyd, Tom O'Keefe, Alicia Sable, Hayley Treider, Amy Wilson**

<http://reviewsoffbroadway.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-best-of-everything-eye-opening-and.html>

A CurtainUp Review

The Best Of Everything

By [Elyse Sommer](#)

No wonder the TV series *Mad Men* had an episode showing anti-hero Don Draper reading a copy of Rona Jaffe's novel, *The Best of Everything*, about women at Fabian Publishing (a thinly disguised fictional version of Fawcett Publications, who pioneered original paperback publishing and where Jaffe once worked as an associate editor). Most of the girls at in the 1960s world of the Sterling Cooper advertising agency on Madison Avenue are still typing away at desks outside male executive offices.

Megan, the girl Don married after the break-up of his previous marriage started out in the typing pool before becoming Don's secretary. Like Jaffe's Gregg, Megan is an aspiring actress. As for Caroline, Jaffe's main character who had the ambition and smarts to climb out of the typist-secretary ghetto to become an editor, she's got much in common with *Mad Men's* Peggy Olson whose copywriting career has its share of personal heartache and frustration about prevailing glass ceiling issues.

We should thank that *Mad Men* episode for renewing interest in the working girl's mind set and milieu that Rona Jaffe so entertainingly explored in her first best seller and for giving Julie Kramer and Amy Wilson's stage adaptation a nifty promotional tie in to the popular series. Kramer and Wilson's play now being given a limited run at the Here Art Center clearly doesn't have a budget to allow for the snazzy production values of either *Mad Men* or the technicolor star studded film version of the novel (Joan Crawford, Hope Lange, super model Suzy Parker). However, this *The Best of Everything* is smartly crafted, staged and acted to make contemporary audiences appreciate Jaffe's very savvy portrait of the working and personal lives of young women more than forty years ago.

Women have come a long way since Jaffe's once shockingly frank look at young women eager for the best life had to offer in the face of limited opportunities and a value system defining what that "best" entailed. The Kramer and Wilson script sticks close enough to the book's characters and plot, to make the story of five Fabian Publishing Company's typists come across as almost ludicrously funny. Yet our amusement doesn't come at the expense of empathy for these eager for life young women. What we laugh at is not them, but the mores that dictated and restricted their

ambitions. Instead of the brass ring associated with good fortune, the ring to catch for these girls was gold and sized to fit the third finger of the left hand. Since the life of young people seeking a taste of New York's excitement and glamour can still be fraught with loneliness, insecurity and pain, especially in terms of romantic relationships, you're likely to find this new look at a dated best seller an emotionally engaging theatrical experience.

The excellent 8-member cast includes co-script developer Amy Wilson as Amanda Farrow Fabian's only female editor, with Sarah Wilson as Radcliffe graduate Caroline, the imperious older woman's much put-upon (but not for long) secretary. Caroline represents the best and the brightest of women entering the work force in the '50s her initial ambition was to marry her Mr. Right who turns out to be Mr. Wrong when he jilts her to marry an oil heiress.

In between Caroline's days in the secretarial pool and her final confrontation with Amanda as an equal — which deepens the sense of the need for mentoring rather than competitive female relationships — Caroline remains closely connected with her typing pool buddies. After all, she was subject to the same societal pressure to find fulfillment through marriage, the burden of virginity and the fears and dangers associated with its loss. Unlike the 36-year old Farrow who, except for a married lover without whom she probably couldn't have nailed that editorial post, she's still part of this group portrait.

To fill in that group portrait, there's the naive April (a delightful Alicia Sable). For comic relief we have the office gossip, Mary Agnes (Molly Lloyd managing to be hilarious without being cartoonish), Brenda (a more sarcasm tinged performance Sas Goldberg) who pares three months of her pregnancy to be able to work past the then commonly enforced rule about not being allowed work once a pregnancy became highly visible. The most troubled and saddest character is Gregg, the part-timer with acting ambitions (a poignant Hayley Treider).

While men were the dominant characters in any publishing or advertising office in Jaffe's day, this is the story of the women who brought them coffee and took their dictation. It's quite apt therefore that the cast in *The Best of Everything*, the play, therefore features just two actors, Jordan Geiger as Eddie, the selfish and unworthy man of Caroline's girlhood dreams, and Tom O'Keefe to play all the others: Two Fabian editors (Shalimar, the lecherous old sexual harasser; and Caroline's friend the hard-drinking much older Mike Rice whose idea of not taking advantage of

her is a phone sex affair). . .April's blind date Ronnie. . . David, the producer Gregg loves too intensely.

Tom O'Keefe gives each man his own touch of individuality but in one of the play's best scenes, Director Kramer uses that multiple casting to create a clever visual metaphor to point to men all being pretty interchangeable in what they represent to the women and what the women represent to them. That scene shows the women dancing with identical grey flannel suit cutouts dancing to Roy Orbison's "Hey Miss Fanny." Kramer also uses Jill BC Du Boff's sound track of popular period tunes to avoid the tedium of the blackouts between the play's sixteen scenes. The Vincent Youmans/Irving Caesar tune "Sometimes I'm Happy" (written in 1925 but a much recorded standard in the '50s) that leads into the play pretty much sums up the period's prevailing female happiness mantra: "Sometimes I'm happy/ Sometimes I'm blue/ My disposition/ Depends on you."

Nothing fancy about Lauren Helpert's scenic design but it's a serviceable in taking us around the Fabian's offices. Daniel Urlie's true to the period costumes make up for the nuts and bolts scenery.

Before getting immersed in the next season of *Mad Men*, you could do a lot worse than spending 90 minutes with Caroline, Mary Agnes, April, Brenda and Gregg -- and yes the tight-lipped, Miss Farrow.