

# 'Esther' premiere shows real promise

Humorous and pithy, musical brings to life Jewish story of Purim



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THEATER REVIEW

## 'Esther, the Musical'

★★★ (out of four stars)

**Length:** 2 hours

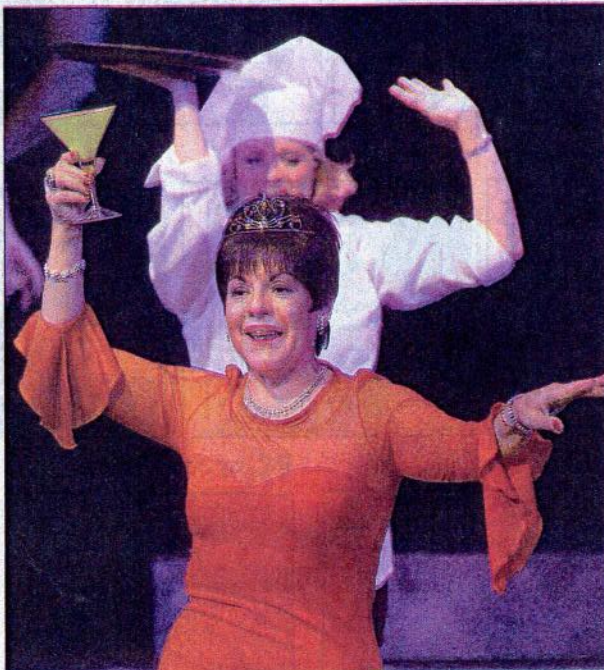
**See it:** 8 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays through June 25 in Spectrum Theater, 160 Fountain St. NE

**Tickets:** \$15 (senior citizens \$10, students \$5); call 234-3946

songs is "The Rally," in which Haman, sung with frightening viciousness by Richard Libertore, advocates the killing of people who are different. While he sings, vignettes unfold in various corners of the stage with Latinos, blacks and Jews being attacked by a black-robed Death.

This song is followed by an even more powerful piece, "Shema Kolenu," a hauntingly melodic anthem seeking God's help in overcoming oppression. Darla Wortley, who portrays the eunuch Hegai and serves as narrator of the story, leads a tuneful ensemble on this song, her strong voice raising spirits as she rattles the rafters.

In the title role, Amy Frank Ostrow is eager and innocent, her voice rising well to the demands of a playful "The Decree" and a more pensive "What Will You Do?" Anyone familiar with the story knows Esther will ask the king to spare the Jewish people, but



**Poised:** Kathy D'Arcy-VanWesep raises her glass as Queen Vashti and, in back, Gina Dawe is Teresh, one of the royal cooks.

Ostrow does a good job of depicting the young woman's fear and hesitation.

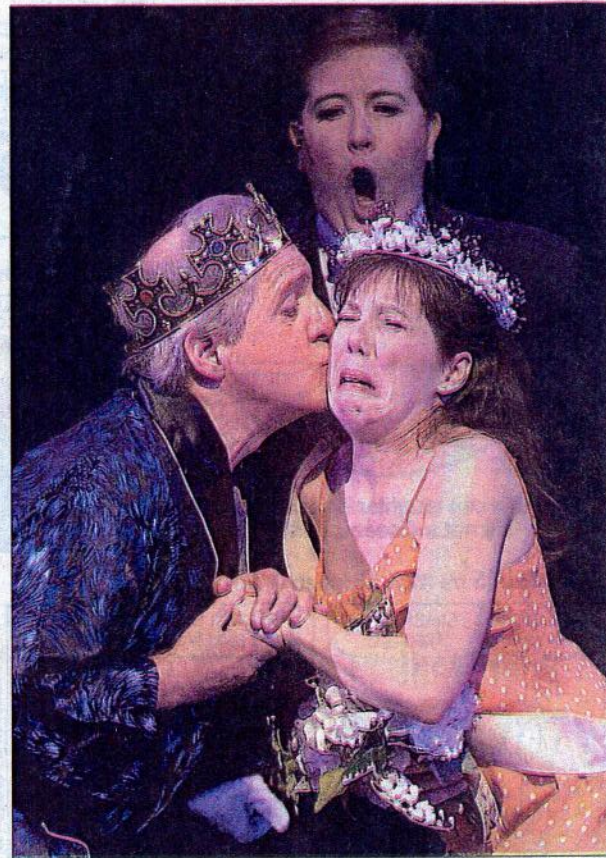
Ostrow's father, local physician Jeffery Frank, creates an exaggerated but humorous king in the style of Mel Brooks. Bill Marfink is more reserved as Esther's cousin Mordechai, but he steps up the humor in a gospel-style song, "We Don't Bow Down."

Kathy D'Arcy-VanWesep is a standout as the haughty Queen Vashti, who isn't about to fade into the sunset and be replaced by Esther. She also leads some ensemble members

in a pair of wonderful top hat and cane tap-dance numbers.

Director Len Robinson has created all sorts of funny business for the large ensemble, from the cigar-chomping servant Bighan (Len Rowe) to a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken at the banquet.

Choreographer Valerie Mould has created several fun dance steps for the ensemble, including a good beer-mug-clanking routine for the opening number, "Drink, Drink, Drink," and some typical Motown moves for the R&B-style "Exalted King."



PRESS PHOTOS/LORI NIEDENFUER COOL

**Regally dramatic moment:** Jeffery Frank portrays the king and Amy Frank Ostrow, Esther, in Jewish Theatre Grand Rapids' production of "Esther, the Musical." The show runs through June 25 in Spectrum Theater.

Some of the songs, such as "The Visit," are silly ditties and don't add much. The sound system squealed a bit Thursday night, and it was hard to understand the lyrics of the ensemble pieces.

Having such a variety of people onstage creates an unpolished, church-pageant feel sometimes, but that adds to the informal party atmosphere.

Not all the singers were up to the music, and some ensemble members delivered lines stiffly.

But when the show was clicking, which it did more than half the time, "Esther, the Musical" shed that first-night awkwardness and gave a glimpse of the classic it could become.

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