

Too many ghosts haunt the grand, old musical theme

Silly "Little Johnny Jones," one of 1904's greatest hits, brings George M. Cohan to the Fisher Theatre, and if you liked Cohan and 1904, there are plenty more where this one came from.

There is Cohan and 1906 ("Forty Five Minutes from Broadway" and "George Washington Jr."), Cohan and 1908 ("Fifty Miles From Boston"), Cohan and 1909 ("The Man Who Owns Broadway") up through Cohan and 1922 and 1928 ("Little Nellie Kelly" and "Billie"). In a sparse day for musical comedy, the theatrical antiquarians who revived "Little Johnny Jones" may have begun a new cottage industry in recalling the works of dear, patriotic George Michael Cohan. There could be one per season from now until



Lawrence DeVine
theater

the year 2000.

"Little Johnny Jones" will do, I think, for now. To all the Cohan musical comedies there was that familiar apple pie bravado. Yes, it is a grand old flag and Mary is a grand old name and "Little Johnny Jones" is only more of the grand old turn-of-the-century hokum. Alas, of course, without George M. himself (who died, at 64, in 1942),

but with David Cassidy.

TO HIS CREDIT, Cassidy sings with a will and gives his best to what stepping the choreographer lets him do, though he is moving among ghosts and shadows. To do any Cohan show, there may be too many of those spectres, too many memories of James Cagney on film, that sway-backed dervish dancing to "Yankee Doodle Boy." Perhaps, to some, memories even of Cohan himself. Certainly, in this story of a feisty little American jockey in England, there is only one American singer and dancer talented enough — and short enough — to play a Cohan avatar, and Joel Grey (in "George M!") already has done it.

In David Cassidy's case, there is also around him the aura of his late father, Jack Cassidy, one of the musical theater's most raffish, brilliant actors, a man born to be a matinee idol, whose teeth shone like the stars and from whose mouth came wittily self-mocking syrup in a seductive Irish tenor even when he was playing a Hungarian. (In his stage roles, Jack Cassidy was certainly the last man you would ever trust out alone with your sister.)

Of course, David Cassidy has to be judged on his own merits as Johnny Jones, but unmistakable is the cocksure, knowing trace of his father's tones when David unveils his own perfect smile and sings "Give My Regards to Broadway." It is a grand old sentiment

In "Little Johnny Jones," David Cassidy sends off occasional sparks reminiscent of his father's stage allure, and the production, a George M. Cohan musical comedy, more than shows its age.



LITTLE JOHNNY JONES Fisher Theatre

Timothy D. McGee.....Randall Easterbrook
Florabelle Fly.....Jane Galloway
Goldie Gates.....Maureen Brennan
Anthony Anstey.....Peter Van Norden
Sing Song.....Bruce Chew
Whitney Wilson.....Ernie Sabella
Johnny Jones.....David Cassidy
Mrs. Kenworth.....Anna McNeely
Capt. Squirvy.....Jack Bittner
American Boys and Girls Colleen Ashton, Teri Corcoran, Susie Fenner, David Fredericks, Linda Gradl, James Homan, Gary Kirsch, Bobby Longbottom, Lori Lynott, Al Micacchion, Annette Michelle, David Monziona, Mayme Paul, Keith Savage, Tammy Silva, Jamie Torcellini

A musical in two acts with book, music and lyrics by George M. Cohan; adapted by Alfred Uhry; produced by Steven Leber, David Krebs and James M. Nederlander and directed by Gerald Gutierrez; with choreography and musical staging by Dan Siretta; setting and lighting by Robert Randolph; costumes by David Toser; sound by Robert Kerzman; musical direction by Lynn Crigler; additional orchestrations by Eddie Sauter and Mack Schlefer; dance arrangements by Russell Warner; vocal and additional dance arrangements by Robert Fisher; conducted by Richard Gordon; originally produced by Michael P. Price and the Goodspeed Opera House. At the Fisher Theatre, through Oct. 3; performances at 8 p.m., Tues-Sat; 7:30 p.m., Sun; and, 2 p.m., Sat-Sun.

tal moment. But it is not his own. Overall, what we are seeing in "Little Johnny Jones" is an actor with baggage he never asked for — all the unavoidable comparisons. But Cassidy, in his first major stage role, is not yet polished, savvy and skilled enough to take what the others have done before and either go beyond them or somewhere fresh and different.

MORE SIMPLY PUT, here is a charming apprentice in a show that had a star in 1904 and needs one today. For "Little Johnny Jones" not only shows

its age; it flaunts it. What is the plot handed to us in 1981? An 100 percent American boy, accused of throwing the English Derby, wins back his honor and also a beautiful copper heiress from San Francisco who has a funny aunt who is in love with a crook and . . . and, well, there is always the tap-dancing.

It is rousing to hear "The Star Spangled Banner" played as part of the overture. This is Lesson 1 in how to get an audience on its feet, before the show even starts. Before long, American flags are blooming all over the stage. The American kids abroad (Johnny, the

heiress, and a hotel full of vacationing young ladies) have it all over the smarty-pants foreigners (who are only English, after all, not sneaky Huns or Reds). And we hear again stand-up-and-cheer lines like Johnny's about Parisian girls: "French pastry ain't worth 30 cents compared to American apple pie!"

(We also hear blatantly vintage jokes like: "Are you speaking to me?" "Certainly I'm speaking to you. Am I supposed to be mad at you?" Or: "Very good sir, I'll call you a cab." "Call me anything you like.")

"Little Johnny Jones" was un-

earthed last summer by Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House, which is alone in preserving and exhibiting old (sometimes very old) American musical comedies and doing it with great respect and affection. This enlarged version of that small summer theater's production shows the effects of being thinned out for the Fisher's vastness. You see the empty spots on the Fisher stage when there isn't much set and only one or two performers are out there trying to fill the bigger space.

The affection, happily, is still there in the colorful costumes — a lot of red, white and blue — and in Goodspeed choreographer Dan Siretta's numbers like the slam-bang "American Ragtime" with the bunch back in the U.S.A. There is so much good dancing by the chorus that it seems a shame David Cassidy is not yet hooper enough to have his own Cohanesque solo to bring audiences to its feet the way that "The Star Spangled Banner" did two hours earlier.

The adoring copper heiress is played by Maureen Brennan, small and sugary, not allowed much zip in 1904. What is lively is her chum, a sly society columnist, played by the marvelous Jane Galloway, and her dithery aunt, played by Anna McNeely. With Galloway and McNeely and that rambunctious banjo player in the pit giving their all so vigorously, occasionally "Little Johnny Jones" seems fresher than 77 years old.