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## The Baby Boomers Tell Their Story, Warts and All

Culture Watch

**by Bruce Chadwick**

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### ***Boomers: the Musical of a Generation***

**June Havoc Theater****312 W. 36th Street****New York, N.Y.**

*Boomers: the Musical of a Generation* starts off with a GI in World War II raising his rifle and shouting that Americans always win. The show then leaps to 1967 and the end of a championship season for that same GI's superstar son's football team, where the players yell that they win. This winning theme is repeated again and again until Americans start to lose in the Vietnam War.

*Boomers* is part of the Midtown International Theater Festival, a two-week only Off-Broadway showcase of some thirty new dramas and musicals (it ends July 30) that hits New York every summer.

Eight or nine of the plays are history plays like *Boomers*, and *Boomers* is a pretty good one.

It is the story of a typical middle class, small-town American family with a generation gap, parental disputes, drugs, drinking, marital woes, friends that are killed and a country that goes through an enormous change during their time on earth, 1945 to the present (well, the early 1990s in the show).

It is not a typical story, but there are elements in it that anybody can relate to, especially people in their 50s and 60s, the baby boomers themselves.

Almost the entire first act is about the Vietnam War and student unrest connected to it. The main character of the play, Will, gives up his college scholarship to Penn State and, friends say, a chance to move on to the NFL, to play guitar in a rock band (not very believable but needed for the story). His best friend Joey, the only African American in his town and in the show, goes off to fight in Vietnam.

Act Two starts with the marriage of Will and Laura in the mid-1970s and moves on from there as they have a child, fight and make up, remember the past and worry about the future. A large ensemble of players helps in these scenes.

Will is played by Peter Davenport, an actor with gray hair who just doesn't play eighteen very well at all (although he is much better as an older man in the second act). He and his girlfriend, Laura are pretty good as a couple trying to keep a family together in the drug era of the 1980s. Their son Joey, Matthew Schmidt, grows in his role.

The entire play is hijacked by Marvin Riggins Jr. as Joey. He is an astonishing presence in the play, a gifted actor and singer who produces electricity

and pathos every moment that he is on the stage.

It is a wonderful performance and it anchors the entire play.

The music in *Boomers* is pretty good, especially the finale, *Celebrate Our Generation, Where Are All My Heroes*, a lament sung by Will in the first act, and a similar sounding song, *Where Is My Hero*, sung by Laura. There is a superb Vietnam War tune, *Da Nang, Da Nang*, by Joey and an ensemble of soldiers, in which he calls Vietnam “Disney with rice.”

The rest of the songs in the show (there are probably too many) carry the plot of the story along and provide a nice sound for the tale as it unfolds.

There is an eerie emotional resemblance to several Vietnam movies, such as *The Deer Hunter*, in some scenes.

The play would look much better in a larger theater with better sets, and some of the songs cut, but even so, playwrights Peter Baron, Mendlee Stein and composer Mark Sansinger have done a fine job of producing an engaging play about the baby boomers.

There are two small structural weaknesses in the play. First, the second act needs more history and a sharper dramatic turn. The years 1976 to the late 1990s were dominated by Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton politically, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the explosion of cable television, the development of the computer and a rocky U.S. economy. There is none of that in the story. The Vietnam War’s end is not shown; neither are U.S. relations with the Middle East. There are no Sesame Street muppets that regaled younger boomers and their children

and still do. There is little on divorce, the trademark of the boomer generation.

One thing the writer and director did very well was recreate anti-war protests on city streets and college campuses. They wrote some haunting scenes that resembled TV coverage of protests in the 1960s and '70s. There are loud chants, peace symbols, yelling and much frenzied placard and poster waving. People are killed.

The second act is a bit flat, and that is even more apparent because it follows a solid and sometimes mesmerizing first act. We need to see more family character development and crisis in the second act (the son does have a problem that works well). The writers might have had the father lose his job, as so many did in the early '90s.

Director Gerald vanHeerden keeps the play moving along at a good pace, blends the music and drama nicely and earns fine performances from Davenport, Blake, Riggins and Charles Karel, Kelley Dorney, Erik Gullberg, David Eiduks, Wade Elkins and Laurie Hymes.

*Boomers: the Musical of a Generation* is just that, a good musical story of a generation that is still here, still huge and certainly not finished making its mark on history.

**PRODUCTION:** Producers: Midtown International Theater Festival, Richard Baron and Ted Mozino. Sets: Brittany Loesch, Costumes: Anne Grosz, Lighting: Paul Hudson, Sound: Carl Casella, Choreography; Kevin Ferguson. Directed by Gerald vanHeerden.

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