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Joshua Finkel and Brian Childers
in *The Kid From Brooklyn*
(Photo: Ed Krieger)

Nearly everyone of a certain age can convulse their friends with quotes from Mel Brooks' 2000-year old man. And if you are of an even earlier generation, you can sing all the words to Danny Kaye's "Anatole of Paris." So it's no wonder that the mostly gray-haired groupies at the El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood were bouncing in their seats. For there was Danny Kaye, up on stage, singing the songs they had memorized so diligently as kids.

Well, not Danny Kaye, exactly—he's been dead for 20 years—but a man who channels him so well in a new musical, *The Kid from Brooklyn*, that he makes it Nostalgia Night in NoHo. Brian Childers has Kaye down pat: the theatrical poses, the delicate prima ballerina hand movements, the little nod of the head.

The Kid from Brooklyn, written by Mark Childers and Peter J. Loewy (who also directs), was first performed in 2006 in Ft. Lauderdale. The current production is its West Coast premiere. It begins with Kaye as a Borscht Belt tummler doing a vaudeville routine about a man trying to buy a suit for his wedding that apparently brought down the house in the late '20s and '30s, a much simpler time.

Kaye was still pretty much unknown when he met Sylvia Fine, (played by look-alike Karin Leone) who literally "made" him. It was Fine who wrote the clever lyrics for the most famous songs and who became his tough-as-nails manager—and his wife. As he laments later in the show, she took over his life to the extent of managing his every move, even to the point of telling him what to wear. This may explain why he became known as a notorious womanizer, romancing many of his leading ladies, and carrying on a long-term affair with comedienne Eve Arden (remember *Our Miss Brooks*?) in the 1940s and a 10-year affair with Laurence Olivier in the '50s. (Hey, it says so in Wikipedia. Would they lie?)

Olivier appears in *The Kid from Brooklyn*, reprising an appearance at the London Palladium in which he and his wife, Vivien Leigh, and Kaye performed the hilarious "Triplets." Olivier is played by the superb Joshua Finkel, who also plays Sam Goldwyn, Billy Rose, Cole Porter, Kaye's first agent, Eddie Dukoff, and a number of other significant people in Kaye's life. He gives each an individuality that makes the show appear to have a cast of thousands.

Eve Arden, Kitty Carlisle, Dena Kaye, Vivien Leigh, and others are played by Christina Purcell in a series of dazzling costumes, period wigs, and an old-fashioned mink coat (all courtesy of Costume Designer Shon Le Blanc). She, like Finkel, appears to be a cast of thousands, female version.

While Childers gets to sing all the Kaye classics ("Tchaikovsky", "Pavlova", "Minnie the Moocher", "Deenah", "Ballin' the Jack"), Karin Leone as Sylvia has a couple of solos ("I Can Do Wonders With You", and "It Never Entered My Mind") that highlight her warm singing voice and soften her otherwise brittle persona.

Meanwhile, upstage left, playing perfect accompaniment, are pianist/conductor David Cohen conductor (alternating with Charlie Harrison), Michael Benedict on winds, Ernie Nunez on bass, and Glenn Ochenkoski on drums. (I attended the show with an old friend, the daughter of Sammy Prager, the man who was Kaye's pianist/accompanist for more than 25 years. She sat there with tears in her eyes and a look of wonder on her face, murmuring, "They're playing my Dad's arrangements. . . they sound just like he used to"! Surely you can't get a finer endorsement than that!)

The Kid from Brooklyn does not attempt to whitewash Kaye or Fine. Mention is made of Kaye's long-time service as a world-traveling ambassador for UNICEF, and then Kaye, smiling and strolling offstage with his grown-up daughter. Period. End of performance. Then, as if recognizing that this was not, the cast returns for their curtain-call with a rousing encore, "Life Could Not Better Be," with Kaye leading them through the audience and out of the auditorium in a boisterous Conga line. **The show is lots of fun. And for true-blue Danny Kaye fans, it is definitely a must-see.**