

For fan, play's the thing

New work cheers 1961 Bx. baseball — and mom

By JOSE MARTINEZ
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The summer of 1961 was the best kind of baseball season for a Yankees fan.

The Bronx Bombers were on their way to another World Series title, and their two slugging outfielders — Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris — were in a to-the-wire race for a home run record that had stood for 34 years.

But the team's next-door neighbor in the Bronx, loyal fan Sadie Newman, wasn't around the old Jewish neighborhood anymore.

"Mom died in 1959," said her son, Fred Newman, a Bronx-born playwright and psychotherapist. "She just missed this great season by a couple of years."

More than four decades later, Newman is commemorating his poker-playing mother by inserting her into his new play, "Mantle, Maris and Mom."

The Off-Off Broadway musical, which debuted last week at the Castillo Theatre in the West Village, is set in 1961 in the Gerard Ave. tenement where he and his mother lived, just a block from Yankee Stadium. It runs through April 8.

"I wanted to give her this little gift," said Newman, the artistic director of the Castillo Theatre. "I wanted to do a play about her."

She's the inspiration for "Grandma Sadie," an ailing eccentric who spends her days with Esther, the neighborhood gossip, and Harry, the local bookie. A block from Yankee Stadium, they track the race to 60 home runs between Mantle and Maris through the roar of the crowd pouring into their homes.

As Sadie's health worsens, she also befriends Mantle, one of the ballplayers who lived in the neighborhood during the baseball season. Her neighbors cry foul.

Soon, Sadie is no longer just fixing up pots of matzo ball soup for her favorite Yankee. In a fantastic twist,



MICHAEL BERMAN



TEAMWORK Actors Nancy Ward (Esther), Kenneth Hughes (Harry the Bookie) and Jill Gureasko (Sadie) warm up before performing "Mantle, Maris and Mom" at the Castillo Theatre. At left, Bill Quinlan (Mickey Mantle) with Gureasko.

she ends up going out on the town to the Copacabana nightclub with Mantle.

"It's not a newsreel; it's not the way things really were," said author Roger Kahn, who saw the play last week. "It's his fantasy."

But that's the charm of the play, said Kahn, who wrote "The Boys of Summer" and has covered baseball over five decades. It steers clear of Mantle's notorious drinking and skirt-chasing to pair him with a dying grandmother.

"I never heard Mantle talk much about Bronx neighborhoods," Kahn said. "He was more into downtown and showgirls."

The unorthodox twosome of Sadie, a Polish Jew, and Mantle, a country boy ballplayer from Oklahoma, sends the message that different cultures

can't ignore each other, Newman said.

"Right down the block, there was this whole other world," said Newman, who is Jewish. "And yet, the community was still pretty narrow-minded."

Newman, 64, grew up in the tenements around Yankee Stadium and lived in the Bronx until the late 1950s, when he left to join the Army. As a young man, he sold programs outside Yankee Stadium, and sometimes charged fans admission to the rooftop of his building at 158th St. and Gerard Ave. from where they could watch games.

"You could see right inside the stadium," he said.

Newman also got to see the players up close, because many lived in buildings along the Grand Concourse. He remembers seeing Mantle on occasion, and delivering groceries to the home of Yankee Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra.

"The players walked down the street, their wives shopped in the neighborhood," Newman said. "You

wouldn't see them do that now."

"Mantle, Maris and Mom" isn't Newman's first play about baseball. He's also directed "Stealin' Home" and "Satchel: A Requiem for Racism," plays about the pioneering black ballplayers, Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige.

But Newman has gained much of his notoriety for repeatedly tangling with the Anti-Defamation League and serving as the political guru to controversial activist Lenora Fulani. He has penned works such as 1999's "The Last Temptation of William Jefferson," a satire based on the scandals of the Clinton presidency.

Newman said he's happy to get back to baseball with his latest work, while remembering his mother and her favorite team.

"I love baseball," Newman said. "And my mother — she was passionate about baseball."

Performances will be held Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., and at 2 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. For information, call (212) 941-5800.