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THEATER

True Believers in the Future of the Musical

By BARRY SINGER

FOR A COMMUNITY OFTEN dismissed as moribund, the American musical theater generates an impressive quantity of cassettes. Most arrive by mail, usually with scripts, in fat envelopes that crowd the desks of Broadway producers and nonprofit institutional theaters alike. On average, each tape represents a minimum of three years' work. All proffer the dream of a newly minted musical.

In the wake of the 1996-97 Broadway musical season, viewed by many in the business as largely an embarrassment of empty spectacle and exorbitant expense, it is helpful to focus on this torrent of tapes. Beyond the sheer volume of melody and hours invested, there is something hopeful about the vast number of aspirants they attest to. For despite the chasm that continues to separate contemporary musical theater from mainstream popular culture, from commercial recording success, from hip, from cool, from now -- lots of people still apparently want in on the great American musical's anachronistic pleasures.

This fact inspires hopeful questions. If there is to be life at all for musical theater in the future, what form will that life take? And how? And, most intriguingly, who? Who will get this dauntingly irrelevant job done?

In a series of interviews with many of the creators and administrators who constitute the Broadway and Off Broadway musical theater community, few answers emerged. But among the names that kept coming up -- some known, others not -- are these: Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa, two young composer-lyricists; Ira Weitzman, a prospector for musical theater talent; Garth Drabinsky, a producer with deep pockets and imperial ambitions; Frank Wildhorn, a pop song writer new to Broadway, and a freshly configured Broadway producing entity involving Jujamcyn Theaters and the Pace Theatrical Group.

Of all the individuals who contribute ably to the development of musicals, to say nothing of institutions like Theaterworks USA in New York, the American Musical Theater Festival in Philadelphia, the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut and the La Jolla Playhouse in California, among many others, this small group of creators and producers are perceived to be

in the vanguard.

Two Composers to Watch

Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa live at opposite ends of Manhattan -- Mr. Guettel in a sprawling SoHo loft, Mr. LaChiusa in a rent-controlled apartment on West 104th Street.

"Different sides of the tracks," said Graciela Daniele, the director and choreographer of Mr. LaChiusa's musical "Hello Again," an adaptation of Schnitzler's play "La Ronde" produced in 1994 by Lincoln Center Theater. "Michael John is not an audience pleaser. He challenges. It's very hard to sell him to a mass audience,"

Speaking about Mr. Guettel, the Broadway producer Elizabeth Williams said something similar: "Unbelievable talent. But tricky. I'd love to work with him. I hope to. It's all about finding the right project."

Mr. LaChiusa, 35, has established his iconoclastic position with offbeat subject matter and an astringent melodic palette, composing musicals that often crossbreed pop and Roman Catholic iconography in a fever dream of radiant awe and disrespect. While he is extremely prolific, critical interest has been sparked specifically by his "First Lady Suite," a series of cheeky mini-operas devoted to Presidential First Ladies, presented over the last few years at various nonprofit theaters, and by "Hello Again."

Mr. Guettel, at 32, has carved out his place with a more slender body of work: a handful of musically audacious one-acts leading to "Floyd Collins," his first full-length musical, produced last year at Playwrights Horizons. With its stark, string-dominated score, "Floyd Collins" managed to depict the heartbreaking dreams and death of a dirt-poor Ozark hillbilly trapped in a cave. Not an easy thing to do.

"Musical theater in the abstract I'm sort of in love with," Mr. Guettel hesitantly admits. He is an earnest, confessed child of privilege, the son of the Broadway composer Mary Rodgers ("Once Upon a Mattress") and the grandson of a patriarch of the modern Broadway musical, Richard Rodgers.

"Musicals are a completely marginalized, sort of contemptible pop culture field that gets no respect," Mr. Guettel said. "And they shouldn't have any, for the most part; they're a very difficult thing to do well and they're very seldom done well. I don't think musicals have gotten an unfairly old-fashioned reputation. My generation is stuck with trying to reverse that perception."

Neither Mr. Guettel nor Mr. LaChiusa nor any of their musical theater contemporaries -- including composer-lyricist teams like Jeanine Tesori, 35, and Brian Crawley, 34 ("Violet");

Randy Courts, 43, and Mark St. Germain, 42 ("Johnny Pie and the Foolkiller"), and Arthur Perlman, 39, and Jeffrey Lunden, 38 ("Wings") -- has yet had a real crack at Broadway. Two generations ago this would not have been the case. Broadway was once a place where composers and lyricists learned their exacting trade on the job. Still, "There's nothing that beats the joy of doing a musical," Mr. LaChiusa said. "I think everybody should be writing them. In another five years everybody's going to be."

A Prospector for Musicals

It is difficult to describe what Ira Weitzman does in musical theater, but the results speak plainly. Since beginning his career 20 years ago at Playwrights Horizons, where he founded and ran the first formal musical theater program Off Broadway, Mr. Weitzman, 42, has shepherded at least one new musical production to the stage every year.

His attentions have nurtured all of William Finn's "Falsettos" trilogy; Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's "Once on This Island"; Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Sunday in the Park With George"; Mr. Sondheim and John Weidman's "Assassins," and many of Mr. LaChiusa's early works, including "Hello Again," which Mr. Weitzman commissioned. He was the associate producer of "Violet."

"My desire," says Mr. Weitzman, "is to locate new writers and work with them in a humane, almost psychoanalytic way to find out what they need in order to accomplish what they want."

In 1992, he transferred his operation uptown, following Andre Bishop, his longtime artistic director at Playwrights, when Mr. Bishop left to assume the same title at Lincoln Center Theater. In the last year, though, Mr. Weitzman's role as director of musical theater at Lincoln Center Theater has diminished, his official status now that of "a free agent," according to Mr. Bishop, "a musical theater consultant paid on a per-project basis."

The change seems to raise fundamental questions about Lincoln Center Theater's commitment to musical theater development. Mr. Bishop says that is not the case and points out that Mr. Weitzman is currently managing two workshop projects for the theater -- freelance. Mr. Weitzman, meanwhile, has resumed his Playwrights Horizons association, returning there as a musical theater consultant -- also freelance.

Hunting for Producers

There are many reasons why certain nonprofit theaters pursue musicals and others do not, but mostly it comes down to money. The budget for a nonprofit musical can range from $100,000 to $1 million. The nonprofit theater's average commission to a composer (or lyricist) for a musical is between $5,000 and $10,000. Hardly enough to carry anyone through the protracted, multi-year development cycle of a new work.

Five years ago, Cameron Mackintosh, the British mega-musical impresario, earmarked a fraction of his profits to set up a foundation for the development of new musical theater in America. The money, close to $2 million, was divided among three nonprofit theaters -- Playwrights Horizons, the Manhattan Theater Club and Lincoln Center Theater -- to be spent over five years, a period now drawing to a close.

Mr. Mackintosh said he has been disappointed by the results. "What I had hoped," he said, "and sadly it hasn't happened, was that the American industry would join in. There is a great thirst to re-establish the American musical tradition. This was to kick-start things."

In an effort to step in where Mr. Mackintosh left off, Wiley Hausam, an associate producer at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, recently founded the New Lyric Festival and Institute in Northampton, Mass. A summer musical theater festival modeled on Tanglewood, the first annual weekend-long event was held last month. Mr. Hausam said he approached "just about every commercial producer in and around Broadway" to help support the festival. "Only one gave me money," Mr. Hausam said.

"I remember a panel I attended," he continued, "where the veteran playwright and director Arthur Laurents addressed many of these Broadway producers. He's one of the toughest guys on earth, but smart, and he said to them, 'Why are you all doing theater? That's the first question you have to ask yourselves. If it's simply to fill your seats and preserve your jobs, that's not a good enough reason.' "

Do Workshops Really Work?

Workshops are where most of the money goes today in musical theater development. From July 1996 to May 1997, Lincoln Center Theater, the Public Theater, the Vineyard Theater and Playwrights Horizons each staged three to five new musical workshops. During that same period, the Manhattan Theater Club sponsored 11 workshop readings and 9 less formal presentations. Another institution, Musical Theaterworks, is devoted almost solely to workshops. At its downtown headquarters, opposite the Public Theater, young composers and lyricists get a chance to hear their work in a professional setting for the first time. More established ones, like Paul Scott Goodman, 37 (currently adapting the Jay McInerney novel "Bright Lights, Big City" for New York Theater Workshop), use it to develop new work.

Yet "writing for workshops is writing for workshops," according to Mr. Hausam. "You get no training listening to a paying audience, then ruthlessly adjusting. Plus, you get infected by -- call it experimental esthetic -- this thing now pervading the institutional world that theater is not meant to be entertaining, it's meant to be self-referential. Nobody will pay to see that in a musical."

Douglas Aibel, the artistic director at the Vineyard, agrees. "Too many workshops tear and tug

away at the writer's vision, like an endless washer-dryer cycle," he said. "The old generation had their developmental process in out-of-town previews where dollars were riding on every decision. As a result, writers gained incredible objectivity about their work. I wonder if you can only learn that with money on the line."

The Film Studio Model

In the realm of commercial theater, Garth Drabinsky is the latest pretender to the throne of Broadway's producing kingdom. With astonishing speed and seemingly bottomless resources, Mr. Drabinsky has powered his Canadian Livent company onto the mainstage of Broadway musical theater production, using many controversial innovations. These include the extensive use of market testing focus groups and audition contests to select composers and lyricists for new projects. Ten songwriting teams, for example, submitted four songs each before Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty won the commission for "Ragtime."

Based on E. L. Doctorow's novel of the same name, the musical "Ragtime" will be the first original work developed by Livent when it begins previews in December on Broadway at the new Ford Center for the Performing Arts, following Livent revivals of "Showboat" and "Candide."

"The corporate structure of my company is set up on a film studio model," said Mr. Drabinsky, a film business veteran with a reputation for flamboyant micromanagement. "The object was to be an integrated structure with the complete capacity to develop new material from inception."

Mr. Drabinsky's ambition to impose corporate order on the chaotic uncertainty of musical theater development tantalizes Broadway's establishment producers. "There has been an abdication of creativity and responsibility by our producers," said Rocco Landesman, president of Jujamcyn, Broadway's third-largest theater-owning and producing organization.

Mr. Landesman recently rocked the Broadway industry by entering into an agreement with a leading national tour packager, Pace Theatrical Group. This new entity, Mr. Landesman said, will also be modeled along the lines of the old Hollywood studios. Thus a film-making concept will define the aspirations, if not the operations, of three of Broadway's four most powerful players in musical theater (excluding the old-line Shubert Organization): Livent, Pace-Jujamcyn and, of course, Disney.

The crushing price of all this empire building could leave creativity in the dust. But Mr. Landesman thinks otherwise. "We're looking at $45 to $50 million that's just been burned," he said about the failure of a number of Broadway musicals last season. "Coupled with the out-of-town meltdown of Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Whistle Down the Wind,' " he added, "we may be looking at an era's end here. Producers have got to get a grip."

Pop Goes to Broadway

In many ways, Frank Wildhorn is the exception that proves no rule. His training is not even in musical theater. Yet, as Mr. Wildhorn sees it, he alone is heir to all those Hollywood scenarios where the young songwriter triumphs on Broadway, wins the girl and sends America home singing.

Born in Queens, Mr. Wildhorn made his fortune in Los Angeles writing hits. A self-taught musician, he put more than 200 of his songs onto the pop charts yet still harbored Broadway ambitions. His first musical, "Jekyll and Hyde," opened at the Plymouth Theater in April. His second, "The Scarlet Pimpernel," begins previews at the Minskoff in October. One critic described Mr. Wildhorn's score for "Jekyll and Hyde" as "music to skate to." Others were less kind. Still, four months later, ticket sales are strong.

"I get called a pop songwriter when I do musical theater," said Mr. Wildhorn, a bearded 38-year-old tycoon in a baseball cap. "I don't apologize for that. If Gershwin and Bernstein were alive today they'd be trying to write hits."

Gershwin and Bernstein aside, with Broadway increasingly adopting film and pop music marketing techniques, proven pop song purveyors like Mr. Wildhorn do offer a direct line to America's pop music consumer. Whether he and they represent Broadway's future is not so much a question of esthetics as demographics.

Broadway producers are understandably dazzled by those demographics. They yearn to draw more established pop songwriters into musical theater and, to date, have succeeded in luring among others Roger Miller ("Big River"), Randy Newman ("Faust") and Paul Simon (whose "Capeman" begins previews on Broadway in December). Still, the ability to write pop songs is no assurance of theatrical success. Nor is the composition of an animated film score like Elton John's for "The Lion King" -- which Disney is presenting as a musical in October on Broadway -- necessarily all it takes. The right combination of commercial songwriting savvy and theatrical craft is notoriously elusive.

Meanwhile, Hollywood and its lucrative animation industry continues to attract talent away from the theater. The most commercially adroit, theatrically sophisticated musical theater composer working today may be Alan Menken, who largely abandoned musical theater ("Little Shop of Horrors") to write for film ("The Little Mermaid," "Beauty and the Beast"). "Seeing 'Beauty and the Beast' on Broadway brings me full circle," Mr. Menken said, about the Disney production, now in its fourth year. "It reminds me where I truly belong."

Sondheim: 'Just Write'

The revolutionary excitement generated two seasons ago by the musicals "Rent" and "Bring In

da Noise/ Bring in da Funk" was nowhere reflected on Broadway last season. Jonathan Larson, the creator of "Rent," probably wouldn't find that surprising. Larson had to wait years before seeing his musical staged anywhere.

Can Broadway's new film studio sensibility accommodate adventurous young talent? At least one novice composer-book writer team will make its debut on Broadway in 1997-98. The commercial producer Margo Lion, backed by Jujamcyn, is betting on Jeffrey Stock, 30 (music), and James Magruder, 36 (book), for "Triumph of Love," her new $3.5 million musical venture based on the Marivaux play, which opens in October with lyrics by Susan Birkenhead.

The director Harold Prince has already announced his collaboration with a young composer-lyricist named Jason Robert Brown, 27, for next season's new Drabinsky musical, "Parade."

Mr. LaChiusa is characteristically juggling four projects at the moment: three musicals and very nearly an opera: "Marie Christine," his version of "Medea," transported to 1880's New Orleans. Characterized by Mr. Weitzman as, "Michael John's 'Porgy,' " the show has languished since Mr. Weitzman presented it in a workshop almost a year ago.

Who would choose this field, asks Mr. Weitzman, "given what you have to go through?"

According to Stephen Sondheim, "You just write, and keep on writing." The composer, as ever, is working on something new, a musical that has had its first workshop (privately) and will now undergo revisions.

"How can you worry about anything else?" Mr. Sondheim asks. "You write, you try to be critical toward what you write -- as Oscar Hammerstein taught me -- and after that, all you can do is hope. That is, if you happen to be so inclined."

Photos: A workshop of "Saturn Returns," a new project by Adam Guettel, with Terry McCarthy, left, Mandy Patinkin, Mr. Guettel, Billy Porter and Lynette Dupre. (Linda Rosier for The New York Times)(pg. 10); Donna Murphy and David A. White in Michael John LaChiusa's "Hello Again." (Joan Marcus/Marc Bryan-Brown)(pg. 10); The composer-lyricist Michael John LaChiusa, above left, with Ira Weitzman, who has commissioned some of his work; below, far left, the composer-lyricist Adam Guettel rehearses with the singer Billy Porter. (Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)(pg. 5); The composer Paul Scott Goodman at a workshop at Musical Theaterworks. (Jose R. Lopez/The New York Times)(pg. 5)
