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THEATER

THEATER; The New Musical: Will Corporate Money Call The Tune?

By BARRY SINGER

Last August in these pages, Barry Singer, who writes about popular music, reported on a disparate group of young musicians and lyricists fascinated by and committed to the American musical. In that article, entitled "True Believers in the Future of the Musical," Mr. Singer found that a new generation was struggling to redefine and create its own traditions. In this article he describes some of the fruit of that labor.

IN the world of musical theater, change is a matter of opinion. Music styles, producing practices, staging conventions persist in loving stasis for generations, interrupted by spasms of change that can be very inconvenient. Denial is always an option.

Take "Rent," for example. Clearly "Rent" changed something about musical theater, if only the limits of forbidden subject matter. Yet contrarians in musical theater will tell you that "Rent" -- a story involving drugs, AIDS and young people in the East Village -- is really "Hair" retrofitted for the 90's. Nothing new. Andrew Lloyd Webber's impact in the 80's? Just recycled Rodgers and Hammerstein with a boost of spectacle. No real change there.

The jolt of Disney's smash "Lion King," however, has been hard to dispute. Not only did a majority of critics like it, but ticket buyers in record-breaking numbers are demonstrating to commercial producers that there is a vast new potential audience for musical theater. Whether its members will prove to be a committed constituency remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, the moment seems auspicious to examine whether anything has changed in the world of the American musical. And who better to ask than the younger generation creating new works?

For the composers Adam Guettel, 33, and Michael John LaChiusa, 36, this has been a pretty good year, if a bit disorienting as a result. Neither has yet to feel entirely secure with things going his way.

Twelve months ago, Mr. LaChiusa had at least four projects in the works and no confirmed productions. Today, he is an artist in residence at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, collaborating with George C. Wolfe, the theater's producer and director, on a new musical version of "The Wild Party," Joseph M. March's verse paean to Roaring Twenties hedonism, scheduled to begin performances in

February. Mr. LaChiusa has also been named a composer in residence at the Chicago Lyric Opera, and Dodger Endemol, the Broadway producing organization, has tapped him for a musicalization of "Zorro." ("It's not your usual sing-along," Mr. LaChiusa insists.)

Perhaps most notably, Lincoln Center Theater has committed to mounting, before the next millennium, Mr. LaChiusa's magnum, near-operatic opus, "Marie Christine," which he has written for the singer and actress Audra McDonald.

"Yes, I've found art and commerce recently," Mr. LaChiusa grudgingly admits. "I'm putting my head on the block."

And the effect of "The Lion King"? "While I admire Julie Taymor's work very much as a director and a designer," he says, "'Lion King' is the marriage of art and commerce. But so is Dolly the sheep. And what will that finally lead to?"

By contrast, Mr. Guettel remains almost chronically circumspect. True, his long-labored-over song cycle, "Saturn Returns," was finally produced (in April at the Public Theater), to critical acclaim. And his 1996 musical, "Floyd Collins," has been resurrected for a national tour expected to culminate at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival next year. Mr. Guettel is even working on a new musical, about which he will say nothing beyond: "I'm into it a lot. It's coming out really fast, for me."

Still, his response to any success is characteristically tortured. "It's like a nerve ending that's inflamed," he says unhappily. "You feel both invincible and incredibly insecure."

As for Disney's "Lion King"? "In Julie Taymor, Disney took a chance on a fringe person who delivered," Mr. Guettel says, referring to the musical's director, who began in nonprofit theater. "That can only help people like me who are perceived to be creatively fringe, too."

Among others of this younger generation writing musicals today, opinions about Disney on Broadway remain pragmatic. The composer Randy Courts, 43, and his lyricist and book writer, Mark St. Germain, 42 -- both veterans of the nonprofit theater -- have noted the commercial success of "The Lion King" while working on "The Gingerbread House," their pop take on Hansel and Gretel, commissioned by Playwrights Horizons, the Off Broadway theater that helped develop "Floyd Collins."

"Corporations are starting to see that there are different ways to make a lot of money with musicals," Mr. Courts says hopefully. "Which means, for the first time, there is actually a chance I might be able to make a living at this."

On the other hand, Jeanine Tesori, who won an Obie Award for her Off Broadway musical "Violet" last season (also developed at Playwrights Horizons), has now decided to branch out. "I'm just diversifying," she insists.

In the last year, Ms. Tesori, 36, has composed an eclectic score of incidental music (recently released on Resmiranda Records) for "Twelfth Night" at Lincoln Center and given birth to a baby. She has embarked on a music-theater piece commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. And she

has signed on to help adapt the film "Thoroughly Modern Millie" for Broadway, to be produced by Whoopi Goldberg and Fox Theatricals.

"More commercial than that you cannot get," Ms. Tesori acknowledges. "In some ways, it's scarier because the money is huge and the margin for making mistakes is really small. There's no room for error with budgets like that."

While Disney continues to hedge those odds by engaging pre-sold pop stars like Elton John and high-profile animated-movie-score creators like Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz to write their musicals, a few new, previously unsung composing talents will join Mr. LaChiusa and Mr. Guettel, Mr. Courts and Ms. Tesori this season with their first significant New York productions.

At 28, the composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown finds himself in somewhat rarefied circumstances, preparing his first major musical, "Parade," in collaboration with a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Alfred Uhry, and a Tony Award-winning legend, the director Harold Prince. The co-production, which begins performances in November at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, unites the biggest nonprofit institutional theater in the country, Lincoln Center Theater, with the Canadian-based commercial theatrical organization Livent.

(The decision by both groups to join forces was made before the current investigation into Livent's accounting practices and the suspension of its impresario-founder and chief creative director, Garth H. Drabinsky. Andre Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, said he had been assured by Livent that "Parade" would proceed on schedule.)

Mr. Brown, who was born in Ossining, N.Y., and grew up in Rockland County, attributes his seemingly meteoric rise in part to Mr. Prince's daughter, Daisy. Ms. Prince first heard him play in a piano bar, conceived and directed a revue of his work, "Songs for a New World" at the WPA Theater in 1995, and wound up introducing him to her father. When Stephen Sondheim decided against composing the music for "Parade," Mr. Prince offered Mr. Brown the job.

"I called Daisy," Mr. Brown recalls, "and I said, 'Daisy, your dad just asked me to write his next musical.' And Daisy said, 'I know, isn't that great?' And I said, 'No, I'm petrified.' "

The subject matter of "Parade" is far from that of a typical commercial musical: the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory manager falsely accused of murder in the Deep South near the turn of the century. For Though Mr. Brown's music tilts strongly toward the accessible, this is not a problem. "I'm trying to express something very individual and specific," he says. "Disney has a very different aim,"

Unlike Mr. Brown, Patrick Cook, 48, and Frederick Freyer, 37, have paid years of nonprofit dues. Alumni of the musical-theater educator Lehman Engel's influential workshops at BMI, the two are grounded in the tradition's craft and lore. Unlike Mr. LaChiusa and Mr. Guettel, though, whose sense of that tradition edges toward the irreverent, Mr. Cook and Mr. Freyer write melodiously earnest music that is anything but revolutionary.

In January, their "Captains Courageous," based on the novel by Rudyard Kipling, will bow at the Manhattan Theater Club. Born at a BMI workshop in 1988, the show has been developed through a circuitous route involving versions at the National Music Theater Conference in 1990, the Ford Theater in Washington in 1992, the Goodspeed Opera House-at-Chester in Connecticut in 1994, and finally in a series of Manhattan Theater Club readings and workshops during 1996 and 1997. The course navigated by "Captains Courageous" is an object lesson -- some would say painful, others merely successful -- in contemporary musical-theater's protracted incubational tendencies.

"The process served us enormously well," Mr. Cook says. "We had time to work and think without an enormous amount of pressure."

And as for Disney and Broadway today? "I think it's great," he replies, "that after so many years of nobody paying attention, the big boys are fighting over Broadway."

Mr. Freyer agrees, with a caveat. "I especially like the fact that there is another generation that seems to feel strongly about writing musicals. There was a time when people simply wanted to throw it all out and start completely fresh. Now there is more of a sense not to be reactionary but to go forward, building upon what these great writers in the past knew."

All of which leaves Ricky Ian Gordon, 42, more or less alone on his own patch of creative musical-theater terrain, light years from Disney or anyone else.

Best known right now as an iconoclastic composer of -- for want of a better term -- classical music, Mr. Gordon's individual art songs and song cycles are staples in the repertoires of singers from Teresa Stratas to Renee Fleming. His opera, "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera. Mr. Gordon's music -- with its references to Debussy, Ravel and Britten crossed with Bernstein, Blitzstein and Sondheim -- has an unexpected emotional potency in light of its compositional rigor.

Today, the composer is immersed in a new Off Broadway musical for the Vineyard Theater, "Dream True," about sexual identity and transcendence. "I used to be afraid of everyone in the theater," Mr. Gordon says. "It's a world of virulent opinions. And now I love it. I love the community of artists."

Last year at this time, Ira Weitzman was enduring the first New York theatrical season in his 20-year-plus career without a Weitzman-supervised musical production. His tenure as director of musical theater at Lincoln Center Theater at an end, he had become a freelance producer.

One year later, Mr. Weitzman has been re-engaged by Lincoln Center Theater (on a freelance basis) to shepherd its announced program of three new musicals. The first, "A New Brain" by William Finn, the Tony-winning composer of "Falsettos," recently ended its run at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. It will be followed at the Vivian Beaumont Theater by "Parade" and then by Mr. LaChiusa's "Marie Christine."

This would appear to be quite a turnabout. Mr. Bishop elaborates: "I was beginning to feel, oh, my

God, we've just got to get back to doing new musicals. And then suddenly it became a celebration: let's end the 20th century doing these three new musicals."

The trick, of course, is paying for them. The total cost for all three has been estimated at \$10 million. (By comparison, estimates of the cost of "The Lion King" have ranged from \$11 million to \$15 million, though Disney has never released an official figure.) Even the resources of Lincoln Center Theater, Mr. Weitzman points out, are "hard-pressed to pay for three in a row."

"The fact that Livent is paying partly for 'Parade,' which it developed, represents one solution," Mr. Weitzman adds. "And, I'm afraid, a general trend. Does the fact that this money is coming from commercial sources influence the end product? Of course it does."

Mr. Bishop calls it "enhancement money." "Nonprofit theaters that want to do musicals today must rely on enhancement money," he emphasizes.

The use of such financing by nonprofits is a development that some theater people worry about in connection with an increasing presence on Broadway of entertainment companies like Disney. Artistically, Ms. Taymor's "Lion King" can be applauded or, by a minority, dismissed. But from a developmental point of view, the corporate goals and methods employed and perfected by Disney with that show -- synergistic animated film tie-ins, vast Hollywood-scale marketing and advertising budgets, a score composed Hollywood-style, by committee -- already are changing the street and, to a lesser extent, Off Broadway's musical-producing priorities as well. Whether that will be helpful or hurtful is endlessly debated. Mr. Wolfe, for one, at the Public Theater, finds it "all astoundingly dangerous."

"Corporate thought process defining the artistic journey results in mediocrity becoming the standard," he says. "When an American musical really works, it is somehow the individual soaring. No corporate structure can duplicate that."

Last season, three new musicals were produced on Broadway with a relative intimacy of scale: "Side Show," "Triumph of Love" and Paul Simon's "Capeman." None fared well.

Margo Lion, who, with the Jujamcyn theater chain, was a co-producer of "Triumph of Love," says, "For something that unknown, you need The New York Times behind you and/or a massive marketing budget. At least one or the other." Ben Brantley, The Times's chief theater critic, panned "Triumph of Love," whose score was written by a composer and a lyricist both under 40.

Countering bad reviews with marketing has been the practice with Frank Wildhorn's musicals over the last two years. Critics were not kind to Mr. Wildhorn's "Jekyll and Hyde" in 1997. They were downright hostile to his "Scarlet Pimpernel" the same year. Yet both continue to run.

Extensive marketing accounts for much of this, agrees Rocco Landesman, the president of Jujamcyn. But is that the whole story? Mr. Landesman smiles. "Peter Schneider, the president of Disney's theater division, said to me the other day -- we were trying to figure out the success of 'Jekyll and Hyde' -- and

he said: 'Big singing.' And I thought, 'Yeah, big singing!' Wildhorn's musicals just blast it at you. There's no other explanation for the success of 'Jekyll and Hyde.' "

Big singing notwithstanding, Jujamcyn's first original joint venture with the tour packager Pace Theatricals will be Mr. Wildhorn's latest musical, "The Civil War," which opens on Broadway in April. "It's a show that can be tried out of town, play some Pace markets, play Broadway -- one of our houses -- and then be guaranteed a road tour," says Mr. Landesman, just a touch sheepishly. "It's perfect."

And what about Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa, Jeanine Tesori and Ricky Ian Gordon? What about Savion Glover, whose choreography and stage magnetism helped make the current "Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk" a hit? Mr. Glover, who after rave reviews is expected to take his recent tap dance show, "Savion Glover/ Downtown," on tour, says he would consider directing a musical now: "I have a couple of ideas I'd like to attack. No disrespect to the history of Broadway musicals, but I'm more interested in the reason why characters start singing."

MS. LION, who concedes she has nothing currently in the works involving young composers, insists, "I'd produce any one of those kids."

Mr. Landesman is equally enthusiastic. "I'd do it in a second," he says. "The capital is there to take chances. Pace has enormous amounts for development."

As for Disney itself? Speaking for his company, Mr. Schneider surprisingly reiterates many of the same thoughts expressed by Mr. Wolfe. "At the end of the day, it's the individuals who make the shows," Mr. Schneider says. " 'Oh, the corporate dollars!' people cry. 'The institutionalization of Broadway!' Au contraire. Corporations, movie studios are good sources of money because, well, we have some.

"But the bottom line is, corporations don't make decisions. People make decisions. At Disney that's me and my colleague, Tom Schumacher, and good old Uncle Mikey Eisner. Are we aware of new talent? Of course we are. Our animation business requires it. But that's why musical theater is so wonderful. It's still about individuals."

Last year, six original musicals opened on Broadway. This season, only two thus far have been announced: "Parade" and an adaptation of the hit 1984 film starring Kevin Bacon, "Footloose."

So what has changed on Broadway in the wake of "The Lion King?"

The business climate, says Mr. Landesman: "All sorts of new sources for capital."

The working climate for women, according to the director and choreographer Graciela Daniele: "The triumphant acceptance of Julie Taymor, as a director and a woman." Ms. Taymor was the first woman to win a Tony Award for direction of a musical.

Nothing really, Harold Prince insists: "I wish I could turn this year's events into some sort of idealistic philosophy, but it's very uncomplicated really. Nothing all that much has changed in my lifetime. Musical theater is about creating things. And hoping people want to see what you put out there.

Honestly. That hasn't changed at all."

For Mr. Wolfe, the operative word is "vigilance": "Yes, this last season has been about the corporation, the corporate thought process. But no corporate structure can duplicate an artist's impulses. The minute the structures start to believe they are the source, well, it's over. So, we'll see."

A Young Generation, a Fresh Sampling of Shows

At any given moment, American musical theater teems with projects. Here is an incomplete alphabetical list of this moment's worth: all original musicals, in various stages of development, none of which have opened yet in New York.

THE BALLAD OF LITTLE JO -- Mike Reid, a former All-Pro football player turned Grammy Award-winning Nashville songwriter, and Sarah Schlesinger, chairman of the graduate musical theater writing program at New York University -- one of the more oddly matched couples currently collaborating on musicals -- have adapted this noted independent film about an abused woman's survival in the Old West. First produced last summer by the New Lyric Festival in Northampton, Mass., it was workshopped last winter in New York.

THE BIG TIME -- Book by Douglas Carter Beane, artistic director of the Drama Dept. troupe and author of the hit Off Broadway comedy "As Bees in Honey Drown"; music and lyrics by Douglas J. Cohen. Originally written as a screenplay for Oliver Stone, the story involves a cruise liner, terrorism and lounge singers. A workshop is scheduled for October.

BRIGHT LIGHTS BIG CITY -- New York Theater Workshop, which developed Jonathan Larson's "Rent," dares lightning to strike twice. Jay McInerney's satirical portrait of the 80's has been adapted by a former compatriot of Larson's, the composer and lyricist Paul Scott Goodman. Performances begin in late January.

CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS -- MGM's swashbuckling Kipling classic has been adapted by Frederick Freyer (music) and Patrick Cook (book and lyrics). Its protracted development history culminates in a New York debut at the Manhattan Theater Club in January.

THE CIVIL WAR -- Frank Wildhorn's next really big musical. The composer of "Jekyll and Hyde" and "The Scarlet Pimpernel" also wrote the book with Jack Murphy and Gregory Boyd. Based on letters, diaries and contemporary accounts, it opens Sept. 16 at the Alley Theater in Houston and is scheduled to open on Broadway in April.

DON JUAN DEMARCO -- Adapted from the 1995 Johnny Depp movie about a psychiatrist with a client who imagines he is the famous lover. Music by Walter Edgar Kennon, lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh, book by Craig Lucas. A workshop in New York is planned for November, following one last May in Seattle.

DR. SEUSS -- A musical revue by Eric Idle, the former Monty Python member, based on the Seuss books, with music and lyrics by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, who won a Tony Award for

"Ragtime." One of several projects with uncertain futures as a result of Garth H. Drabinsky's suspension over financial problems at Livent.

DREAM TRUE -- An experimental piece by Ricky Ian Gordon (music and lyrics) and Tina Landau (book, lyrics and staging), being developed by the Vineyard Theater for a spring production.

ELABORATE LIVES: THE LEGEND OF AIDA -- The first Disney musical not based on an animated film. Music by Elton John, lyrics by Tim Rice, book by Linda Woolverton. It opens Oct. 7 in Atlanta, a co-production of the Alliance Theater Company and Disney, and is expected to continue on to Broadway.

FAUST -- A much-troubled vehicle with a much admired Randy Newman score. Various mounted over the last few years by such regional theaters as the La Jolla Playhouse in California and the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago, its pre-Broadway engagements have fallen short of their promise.

FOOTLOOSE -- The hit 1984 film adapted for Broadway by Dean Pitchford (who wrote the lyrics, as well as the original screenplay) and Walter Bobbie (who is also directing), it has music by Tom Snow that is supplemented by a passel of pop songs by commercial songwriters, including Sammy Hagar and Kenny Loggins. Is it an original musical? Audiences will soon find out. It opened last night at the Kennedy Center in Washington for a tryout before its October opening on Broadway.

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE -- Randy Courts and Mark St. Germain's new commission from Playwrights Horizons, a contemporary pop retelling of the Hansel and Gretel story, is still at the development stage. Their previous musicals include "Jack the Ripper" and "Johnny Pye and the Foolkiller."

JANE EYRE -- The Charlotte Bronte novel adapted by John Caird (book, additional lyrics and direction), with music and lyrics by Paul Gordon. Expected to come to Broadway after opening in Toronto in late 1996, but currently in a suspended state.

LE DIABLE AU CORPS -- By the admired composers of "Wings," Arthur Perlman (book and lyrics) and Jeffrey Lunden (music), based on the 1923 Raymond Radiguet novel of the same name ("The Devil in the Flesh"), about an affair between an adolescent boy and an older woman whose husband is a soldier in World War I. Very close to a first draft.

MARIE CHRISTINE -- Michael John LaChiusa's operatic musical resetting of "Medea" in turn-of-the-century New Orleans and Chicago. Announced by Lincoln Center Theater for next season.

MIRETTE -- An adaptation of Elizabeth Diggs's award-winning novel "Mirette on the High Wire" by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones, creators of "The Fantasticks." Produced this summer at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut.

ONCE AROUND THE CITY -- A musical about real estate and romance in the 1980's by the brothers

Reale: music by Robert Reale; book and lyrics by Willie Reale, the founder of the 52d Street Project, a children's theater program in New York. Produced by New York Stage and Film this summer at the Powerhouse Theater at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

ONLY A KINGDOM -- An abdication musical about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor by Judith Shubow Steir. To be presented by the Pasadena Playhouse in Pasadena, Calif., in November, with hopes of a Broadway move.

PARADE -- A co-production of Lincoln Center Theater and Livent. Book by Alfred Uhry, music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown. Directed by Harold Prince. Performances are to begin at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in November.

QUEEN -- Craig Lucas and the rock group Queen in a secret collaboration, so far. Really.

RAVENSHEAD -- A modern opera for solo voice by the composer Steve Mackey and the librettist Rinde Eckert, based on the true story of a failed solo sail around the world. To be presented in March by the Berkeley Repertory Theater in California.

THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS -- Another Livent project whose fate has yet to be determined by the company's new executives. Based on the legendary 1957 film about corrosive power and ambition in New York City. Music by Marvin Hamlisch, lyrics by Craig Carnelia, book by John Guare.

THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE -- An adaptation of the classic 1967 Julie Andrews flapper film, using some of the original score, vintage songs from the period and new songs by Jeanine Tesori. Scheduled for Broadway sometime before 2000. Whoopi Goldberg is one of the producers.

UNTITLED -- A new musical by Adam Guettel. "It's a love story," is all he will say, for now.

THE WILD PARTY -- Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe tackle Joseph M. March's Roaring Twenties verse classic. Scheduled to begin performances at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in February.

WISE GUYS -- Stephen Sondheim's latest, with a book by John Weidman, is based on the lives of two brothers, the Prohibition-era con men and bons vivants, Wilson and Addison Mizner. Next reading scheduled for October, with a production tentatively expected by next summer.

ZORRO -- Michael John LaChiusa's Broadway commission from Dodger Endemol productions. Still at the contract-signing stage.

Photos: BRANCHING OUT -- The composer Jeanine Tesori is "just diversifying" for now. (Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times); PAGING CHARLOTTE BRONTE -- Marla Schaffel, left, and Brooks Almy in "Jane Eyre." (Cylla Von Tiedemann/"Jane Eyre"); IMMERSED -- The composer Ricky Ian Gordon is working on a new musical. (Robert Barboza for The New York Times); MYSTERIES OF SONG -- The choreographer Savion Glover has a few questions about musicals. (Hassan Kinley/"Savion Glover/Downtown")(pg. 25); SHOW AND TELL -- Michael John LaChiusa, at piano,

and George C. Wolfe working on "The Wild Party," a new musical. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times); A TRUE STORY -- Jason Robert Brown, the author of the score for the new musical "Parade," at Lincoln Center. (J. Emilio Flores/The New York Times)

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