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THEATER/THE TONY AWARDS

THEATER/THE TONY AWARDS; A Crash Course in the World of Mel

By BARRY SINGER

EVEN Broadway's most maladroit impresario, Max Bialystock of "The Producers," understands that to create a musical -- good or otherwise -- the appropriate creative team must be employed. For Bialystock, in Mel Brooks's current hit musical, the assured failure of his show, "Springtime for Hitler," is dependent on securing the services of a director named Roger De Bris.

"Is he good?" inquires Bialystock's ingenuous partner, Leo Bloom, as they head for a rendezvous with De Bris. "I mean, is he bad?"

"He stinks," Bialystock replies. Shortly thereafter, Bialystock imploringly informs De Bris: "Roger, I speak for Mr. Bloom and myself when I say that you are the only man in the world who can do justice to 'Springtime for Hitler.' "

For Mr. Brooks, assuring the successful transformation of his 1968 film "The Producers" into a Broadway musical required at least one similarly baldfaced overture.

"Two and a half years ago, my husband, Mike Ockrent, and I got a call saying Mel Brooks wanted to meet us," Susan Stroman said recently. A Tony Award nominee this season for directing and choreographing "The Producers," Ms. Stroman was also the co-creator, director and choreographer of "Contact," for which she won a Tony last season.

" 'Sure,' we said, 'maybe next Thursday.' 'No,' we were told, 'he wants to meet you right now.' About an hour later I opened our front door and there stood Mel Brooks. He didn't say hello. He just launched full voice into the song 'That Face,' which now opens our second act, marching down my long New York hallway and jumping up on top of my living room sofa to finish the tune.

" 'Hello,' he finally said, 'I'm Mel Brooks,' before going on to sing a few other songs he'd written for the show. Only then did he stop to announce: 'I want to make a musical out of "The Producers." And you're the people I want to help me.' "

Certainly, what has literally made "The Producers" a musical are the 16 new songs that Mr. Brooks wound up composing to supplement the three he had originally created for the movie.

But what has helped make "The Producers" a smash musical are a host of ingenious coups de théâtre that Mr. Brooks and Ms. Stroman went on to devise for many of those songs in collaboration with the set designer Robin Wagner, the costume designer William Ivey Long and Mr. Brooks's book-writing partner, Thomas Meehan -- all of whom have also been nominated for Tony Awards for their work on the estimated $10 million show at the St. James Theater.

Yes, the movie was a mother lode of comedic source material. And yes, the stage performers of "The Producers," led by Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick (two other Tony nominees in the show), are a very funny bunch.

But to truly understand the critical and commercial frenzy "The Producers" has generated, it is necessary to look at its seemingly breezy creative details. The real answers lie there.

"To begin with, everyone had to be on the same page," said Ms. Stroman, sitting beside Mr. Wagner on a recent afternoon in his sun-drenched design studio on lower Broadway. "And for that you had to immerse yourself in the world of Mel."

The nascent production suffered a major loss in December 1999 with the death of its 53-year-old director, Mr. Ockrent, from leukemia. "We lost Mike, and about two months later Mel came to me and asked me to continue," said Ms. Stroman, who had been designing the show's choreography. "Of course it was painful. But the best remedy for grief is laughter. And, needless to say, Mel makes me laugh. Not only while working; he's also very funny to eat with."

Mr. Wagner had worked with Mr. Ockrent and Ms. Stroman on the Tony Award-winning musical "Crazy for You." "I brought Robin in for 'The Producers' immediately after the first read-through of our barely finished script," Ms. Stroman said. "Robin is the master of the backstage musical. And 'The Producers' is all about the theater."

Mr. Wagner shrugged modestly. "When I first read that script it seemed so complete. Mel and Tom had worked out all the problems of designing this show, how to get actors from one place to another. Every transition was a natural transition."

Ms. Stroman nodded. " 'The Producers' has all the elements of a traditional musical comedy, but in fact it's directed and designed with a very contemporary eye. An audience today has far more cinematic expectations; they need the plot pushed forward at all times. And that even applies during set transitions. Nobody wants to sit through a blackout anymore. I insist that no set change be more than seven seconds. I don't want an audience to wait longer."

But what about some of those breakout bits? What about the pigeons, the little old ladies with

walkers, the storm troopers? In terms of creative gestation, who made what happen where?

"First, Mel had to let go of some of the screenplay," Ms. Stroman said. "Initially, he was a little reticent. For example, we gave Leo Bloom a secret desire to be a Broadway producer, which isn't in the movie. Mel came to like that."

The movie, of course, had real pigeons, kept in a rooftop coop by the Nazi "playwright" Franz Liebkind (portrayed on the stage by Brad Oscar -- another of the show's 15 Tony nominees). The musical turns these "doity, disgusting boids" -- as Liebkind's building "concierge" in the movie describes them -- into puppets.

"The pigeon puppets were my idea," Ms. Stroman said. "Everybody is so obsessed with putting puppets in shows today, I thought: 'What if we had puppets that were actually funny? What if we found somebody who could build pigeon puppets to sing backup vocals behind Liebkind?' "

As Mr. Wagner remembered it: "We were going to have hand puppets originally, sticking through a black drop. But then I found this guy in Brooklyn who makes really big puppets. He also wound up working on our Nazi marionettes in the 'Springtime for Hitler' number."

Ms. Stroman laughed ruefully. "At first, his pigeons were as big as giant turkeys. But he shrank them down, made sure their wings could move. And behind those pigeons now are four of my showgirls."

Mr. Wagner grinned. "Four other pigeons."

Ms. Stroman continued. "They sing and they move the puppets. Which makes the pigeons very human. Because the girls react to whatever Liebkind does."

Beyond pigeons, the movie had plenty of little old ladies. None of them, however, wielded their walkers as dance partners.

"The genesis for our old-lady-with-walker kick line," Ms. Stroman said, "was a speech Mel had written for Max Bialystock that began: 'I'm about to launch myself into Little Old Lady Land.' 'Oh, yeah?' Robin and I thought. 'Well, how about a little old lady theme park?' "

Mr. Wagner took it from there. "The set started as a valentine card in my mind, filled with little old lady lace. This season, we actually have a production of 'Follies' on Broadway, but one of my great theater memories was Boris Aronson's original design for that show -- this fantastic abstract set, in the middle of which appeared this perfect little valentine for the section called "Loveland." I meant mine as an homage to 'Follies,' though it seems to have come to be regarded as a parody. That was not my intention.

"But you just can't leave people like Stroman around with toys like that. It blew up from there,

because Mel, being who he is, develops everything, and Stro's the same way; she'll take an idea out about 10 levels and then end it with a capper.

"First came the old lady Rockettes with walkers," he continued. "Soon we were dragging trampolines into rehearsals just to see what we could do with them. That was the signal for me that all bets were off. I said to Stro, 'You've been using a lot of swings uptown in "Contact," why don't we try a few down here?' "

Ms. Stroman shook her head. "You can't be afraid to try anything," she said. "It's all about taking chances. What you suggest might not be right at that moment, but it could spark something in someone's imagination to take it further."

Mr. Wagner smiled wickedly. "Which brings us to 'Springtime for Hitler.' The mirror we use for the overhead Busby Berkeley effect is, of course, my little nod to 'A Chorus Line,' which I designed. I figure, any time you line up 24 creatures in front of a mirror, you've got 'A Chorus Line.' "

Ms. Stroman added: "It was Robin who also pointed out that I didn't have enough cast members to make a dancing swastika. Then I remembered William Ivey Long had done a show for Siegfried and Roy once, where he created a whole army coming at the audience: dancers with army-men dummies on each side of them. So I called William and said: 'What if we put storm trooper puppets on either side of the dancers and make them goose-step? Could you do that?' And he said, 'Sure I can do that.' So we worked out how many dancers we would need. And it became a perfect statement of what the Nazis were like, actually, these indistinguishable storm trooper puppets."

Three musical moments -- three collaborative theatrical brainstorms. Such delirious interplay has long been the essence of classic musical comedy.

"Mel kind of turned the key in the ignition and then we were off," Mr. Wagner said. " 'Hmmm,' you think, 'maybe we can do that.' And when you find out you can, well, he is so damn pleased."

Ms. Stroman nodded. "That became our litmus test. It's just so great to make Mel Brooks laugh."

Photos: Robin Wagner, the set designer of "The Producers," in his studio with Susan Stroman, the director and choreographer. At left, the singing pigeons. (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 12); A "little old lady theme park" by Susan Stroman and Robin Wagner. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 16)

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