

IF THE *SHOES* FIT. . . .

YOU NEED A ROAD MAP AT this point to follow *The Red Shoes*, Broadway's \$8-million musical endurance race. But a topographic picture of the show's ups and downs does emerge if you listen closely to the echoes along 51st Street.

The show is housed at the Gershwin Theatre, Broadway's only parking garage/playhouse, where for weeks now, *The Red Shoes* has been, to put it kindly, in the shop. (It will finally open on December 16.)

Dazed *Red Shoes* folks have been gathering at Trionfo Ristorante, a modern trattoria just outside the Gershwin. Conversations at Trionfo back tables have touched on these topics, among others: the dumping of director Susan Schulman back in August ("Susan wanted to do a kind of radical-feminist revision on the film. That freaked a few

people out"); the subsequent hiring of legendary Hollywood director Stanley Donen, making his Broadway



debut ("Stanley, like our producer, Marty Starger, and our composer, Jule Styne, as older men, believes that *The Red Shoes* is not about the ballerina but about the aging impresario who falls in love with her"); the demotion of lyricist/librettist Marsha Norman in favor of Styne's old lyric-writing crony Bob

Merrill ("Merrill's never even seen the show. He lives in L.A. and hates to travel because of a bad back, so his lyrics are literally phoned in"); and the new lyricist's puzzling, pseudonymous billing alongside Norman as "Paul Stryker" ("Why? No one knows why").

About the only items left undiscussed, it seems, are the more recent dismissals of two featured *Red Shoes* actors and the show's leading man, Roger Rees. This may be more a matter of exhaustion than anything else.

It may be said that *The Red Shoes* was conceived just across 51st Street, atop the former Mark Hellinger Theatre, where Jule Styne kept an office for more than 40 years. In 1991, the Nederlander Theatrical Organization sold the Hellinger to an evangelical church, of all things, ensuring the eviction of Styne—an especially wrong turn, in retrospect, considering that

the Nederlanders are today landlords of the Gershwin Theatre and major backers of *The Red Shoes*.

Now resettled five blocks to the south, Jule Styne is the last stop on any *Red Shoes* road map. "So we fired a director and a couple of second leads," the venerable composer growls, still swaggering at 87. "So we brought in another lyricist. Do you know how many directors and actors and songwriters have been fired over the years from great shows and not-so-great shows? The bottom line is, Does the show work?"

Styne has the answer at hand. "It's the best work I've ever done. It's the ballet music nobody ever thought I could write. It's a big, big show, the kind nobody writes anymore."

Back down the street at Trionfo Ristorante, *Red Shoes* regulars have their own private title for the show—one of several less-than-pet names it has inspired. "It's *Jule's Last Jam*," they say, with just a hint of wonder.

BARRY SINGER