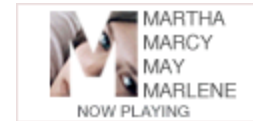


## The New York Times

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August 27, 2000

THEATER

# THEATER; 'Youngsters' Reach Broadway Bearing Gifts: Musical Scores

By BARRY SINGER

IF the 2000-01 musicals season has any unifying theme right now, it is the youthful tilt among those songwriters -- experienced and novice, alike -- who will soon be facing the music on Broadway.

David Yazbek, a composer and lyricist, is pushing 40. Among the elders of Broadway's musical theater fraternity -- John Kander, 73; Fred Ebb, 65; Cy Coleman, 71; Stephen Sondheim, 70 -- this makes him a veritable teenager. Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin are even younger, 26 and 30, respectively. Jeanine Tesori is 38 and Stephen Flaherty is 39, pretty young, too, by Broadway standards, as are Paul Gordon and Don Schlitz, who are in their 40's. Mel Brooks, of course, is not.

New work by every one of these younger creators, and Mr. Brooks, will be on view over the next months as at least seven musicals with original scores make their way toward Broadway. Some are by newcomers like Mr. Yazbek, a combination of indie rocker and former Letterman gag writer, whose music and lyrics have helped transform the popular film "The Full Monty" into a widely anticipated show scheduled to open in October.

Another eagerly awaited musical is by the Broadway veterans Mr. Flaherty, the composer, and Lynn Ahrens, the lyricist, who are following up their 1998 Tony Award for "Ragtime" with "The Seussical." Based on the Dr. Seuss books, it will have an out-of-town tryout in Boston before coming to Broadway in October.

Then there is the ever-youthful 74-year-old Mr. Brooks, who has reworked his classic cinematic paean to bad taste and Broadway musicals, "The Producers," into a fully scored stage show, with words and music ("Springtime for Hitler" included) by none other than himself. "The Producers," its producers hope, will reach Broadway in the spring, appropriately.

The presence of younger musical theater writers this season, however, is another signal that a new generation is reaching Broadway. Two seasons ago, Jason Robert Brown's "Parade" was

seen at Lincoln Center, while last season it was the turn of Michael John LaChiusa's "Marie Christine." Mr. LaChiusa's second Broadway musical last season was "The Wild Party." Mr. Brown is 30 and Mr. LaChiusa is 38.

"I think people are just wising up to the fact that they're going to run out of revivals," said Ira Weitzman, a longtime champion of new musical theater talent who helped bring in "Marie Christine."

"Producers are finally realizing that musicals don't just get born somewhere where you can go shop for them," Mr. Weitzman said. "And the coterie of new writers has become larger and more varied in the kind of work they are doing. The more experimental composers are still around, but there is also a groundswell of young people writing in a more pop vernacular. Despite the odds, a new generation has come into existence on their own; a sub-community of Broadway.

There really is a healthy mixture of established and emerging artists getting shots this season, an intermingling of them. No one is even emerging anymore; everybody seems to have emerged. There's just a lot more receptivity."

It would be reassuring to think that the modest increase in American musicals with original scores expected on Broadway this season (seven versus five last season and three the season before) is in some way related to the imminent departures of "Cats" (Sept. 10) and "Miss Saigon" (Dec. 31), those seemingly immovable monuments to British musical theater know-how. But that is not apparently so.

"Certainly it is the close of a chapter," Mr. Weitzman said. "I don't think it's cause and effect, though. Yet something definitely is being freed up."

Peter Schneider, the chairman of Walt Disney Studios, had his own interpretation: "The most important thing when developing new work is knowing you've got the right theater to take your work into. We waited three years with 'Lion King,' looking for just the right venue, before the New Amsterdam finally made that show possible. So, yes, you might say that the liberation of the Broadway and Winter Garden theaters by "Miss Saigon" and "Cats" could trickle down to encourage new work. But I doubt it."

Two songwriters who may not have to wait for a theater are Mr. Beguelin and Mr. Sklar, neither of whom are neophytes, despite their youth. Mr. Beguelin is a playwright and a lyricist-librettist whose work has been produced Off Broadway; Mr. Sklar has been a conductor for "Titanic," "Miss Saigon" and "Les Miserables." Their new musical, "The Rhythm Club," which has a target opening date in February, celebrates the doomed world of young swing music lovers in Nazi Germany. The show recreates the sounds of the 1930's with a contemporary spin.

Ms. Tesori, a Tony nominee for her recent scoring of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" at Lincoln Center, has contributed six new songs to "Thoroughly Modern Millie," an adaptation of the 1960's flapper film that its producers hope to bring to Broadway in the spring. The show opens first at the La Jolla Playhouse in California on Oct. 15.

MR. SCHLITZ and Mr. Gordon are accomplished pop songwriters, who are both making their Broadway debuts (both also declined to give their exact ages). A Grammy Award winner for country-western crossover hits (including Kenny Rogers's single "The Gambler"), Mr. Schlitz has written the music and lyrics for Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer," a show expected to open on Broadway in April.

Mr. Gordon, who has created songs for Bette Midler and Amy Grant, among others, is the composer and lyricist for "Jane Eyre," a musical version of the classic Charlotte Bronte novel. Scheduled to open on Broadway in December, the show had its world premiere in Toronto in 1996 and its American premiere at the La Jolla Playhouse last year. With its Gothic pop-operetta score, and a set by John Napier, the designer of "Cats" and "Sunset Boulevard," it evinces vestiges of the British mega-model a la Andrew Lloyd Webber.

For Gerald Schoenfeld, chairman of the Shubert Organization and theatrical chain, nothing could be more sensible. "I would love to have seen 'Cats' go on forever," said the longtime landlord of "Cats" and "Miss Saigon" (and a "Cats" co-producer). "Cats," he said, "was one of the saviors of the American musical theater. It produced a golden age."

Not, however, the same golden age that has inspired Mel Brooks to go to Broadway. " 'The Producers' is my love letter to the Broadway I loved that no longer really exists," Mr. Brooks said earlier this month by telephone from London. "From 'High Button Shoes' to 'Guys and Dolls' and 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.' Musical comedy. There hasn't been a down and dirty musical comedy in forever. Nobody even uses the words anymore. I lived for that. It's in my blood. I can't wait to go out of town and find out what stinks and fix it up. I have too much respect for Broadway to fool around."

"Rodgers and Hart and the Gershwins and Cole himself and Irving himself," Mr. Brooks continued, referring to Cole Porter and Irving Berlin. "We're all old composers at heart. To write for Broadway you have to be. It's just that some of us are older than others. And the other way around."

And Andrew Lloyd Webber?

"And Andrew Lloyd Webber," Mr. Brooks replied. "Who doesn't write many funny songs."

Other projects with interesting pedigrees are in the works, though their chances of reaching Broadway this season are uncertain. The new Kander and Ebb musical, based on the play "The

"Visit" by Friedrich Durrenmatt, was to star Angela Lansbury. When Ms. Lansbury withdrew because of the illness of her husband, the producers began to search for a substitute. "We are holding onto our theater, the Broadway, for April," said the lead producer, Barry Brown. "But you don't just replace Angela Lansbury overnight."

Another anticipated musical is the adaptation of the John Waters cult film classic "Hairspray," with music by Marc Shaiman, the talented composer behind the recent hit movie version of the animated television series "South Park."

Transforming movies into musicals has become something of a fad on Broadway lately -- from "The Full Monty," "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and "The Producers," which involve largely original new scores -- to "Saturday Night Fever" and "The Lion King," which mainly reimagine existing soundtracks, as well as the now departed "Footloose."

Musicals seem to be on the movie industry's mind, too. At least three new Hollywood films this year are so billed: Lars von Trier's "Dancer in the Dark," a winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes; "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" by the Coen Brothers, and Baz Luhrmann's "Moulin Rouge."

On closer inspection, none of these films really qualify as original movie musicals in the classic MGM sense. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" is a retelling of Homer's "Odyssey," set in the Depression South with music of the era. "Dancer in the Dark" uses numbers from "The Sound of Music" in what is otherwise a nonmusical film.

Mr. Luhrmann's "Moulin Rouge" is a bit different. In retelling the story of Toulouse-Lautrec's bohemian life in Paris at the end of the 19th century, Mr. Luhrmann draws on music from the 20th century -- beginning with the can-can but ranging through the Beatles and Madonna. Much of it is sung by his stars, Nicole Kidman, John Leguizamo and Ewan McGregor, among others. Some of the movie's score is performed on the soundtrack by contemporary musicians like Moby, Beck, U2, Massive Attack and Fatboy Slim.

From a distance -- the movie is scheduled to open in December -- the project looks like a step toward truly injecting today's pop music into the American movie musical. So far, though, only animated features have engaged songwriters like Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty ("Anastasia") and Alan Menken ("Beauty and the Beast" and "The Little Mermaid") to create full scores entirely from scratch for the movies.

The nonprofit standard bearers of musical theater continue to develop new works very much from scratch. At Lincoln Center Theater, workshops of two new musicals will soon be held: one with a score by Harry Connick Jr. entitled "Thou Shalt Not" and based on the Emile Zola novel "Therese Raquin," directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman ("Contact"); the other (as yet untitled), composed by the ubiquitous Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty, with a book by the equally ubiquitous Terrence McNally (the librettist for "The Full Monty" and "The Visit").

In addition, Lincoln Center Theater has commissioned a new work from Mr. Brown, who won a Tony Award for "Parade." The show, "The Last Five Years," will be seen in the spring at the North Light Theater in Chicago.

In June, the Drama Dept. will present its first original musical, "The Big Time," a musical comedy about terrorism and show business by Douglas J. Cohen (music and lyrics) and Douglas Carter Beane (book), originally written by Mr. Beane as a screenplay for the director Oliver Stone.

Another new musical in June will be "Once Around the City" at Second Stage by the brothers Reale, Robert (music) and Willie (lyrics).

The Manhattan Theater Club, which last season was frustrated by mixed reviews in its desire to transfer its own "Wild Party" to Broadway, will be producing three new musicals: "A Class Act," built around existing show music by the late Edward Kleban, the lyricist for "A Chorus Line"; "New Yorkers," the working title for a revue by two promising young talents, Stephen Weiner, a composer, and Glenn Slater, a lyricist; and "Time and Again" a chamber version of the musical based on the Jack Finney novel of the same name that was first presented in 1995 at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego. The score is by Walter Edgar Kennon.

The Joseph Papp Public Theater, which had its own problems with the mixed reception of Mr. LaChiusa's Broadway version of "The Wild Party," has several musical projects in the works. These include "Radiant Baby," with music by Debra Barsha, about the artist Keith Haring, and "Caroline or Change," a show with music by Ms. Tesori and book and lyrics by Tony Kushner, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Angels in America." Neither project is expected this year.

"My personal belief is that we are not going to be seeing serious adult musicals on Broadway anymore, except as an aberration," said Wiley Hausam, the associate producer for musical theater development at the Public Theater. "Broadway already is a Disney family theme park. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if Disney made an offer for all the Shubert and Nederlander theaters one day. Audiences have become so much less sophisticated that I worry for the future."

THE musical theater historian and author Ethan Mordden is more blunt. "Writing smart shows is no good with stupid audiences and stupid critics," Mr. Mordden said. "Lately, the shows Off Broadway have been too smart and people are too dumb. The music is too sophisticated. These are lazy people who just can't get a handle on music in the theater because they don't want to work hard; they don't know how to work hard intellectually. Most are actually not happy to be in a theater anyway. They've been told they should go, so they do and then they find they have to think. 'Think? You mean I paid all that money and I have to think?' "

For years, one of Broadway's greatest attractions was its flair for presenting sophistication

without pretension. To Mr. Yazbek of "The Full Monty," that historic blend is the point. "Don't be too earnest," the 30-something Mr. Yazbek said, in defining his own aesthetic (Mr. Yazbek also refuses to give his exact age). "Don't be too 'Oh, it's a musical, I have to express myself.' "

The style apparently fit his future producers' vision for "The Full Monty," which had an earlier run at the Old Globe in June. "I was desperate to avoid the kind of anthem-laden musicals that are everywhere," said Lindsay Law, president of Fox Searchlight Pictures. Mr. Law was a producer of the film version of "The Full Monty." After receiving what he called a surprisingly large number of offers for the rights to make a musical of the film, Mr. Law decided his company should produce the show.

"We asked the composer Adam Guettel first and he passed," Mr. Law said. "Adam then proposed this guy he had once played with in a garage band" -- Mr. Yazbek.

"There are people who burn to do this," Mr. Yazbek said. "People who define themselves by the success or failure of their musicals, as though they are baseball players or something. I don't know, I've always just wanted to make music and put it out there. There's definitely pop in my music, there's definitely jazz, and rock 'n' roll, too. But the producers heard musical theater. And for that, I'm glad."

The results, while far from certain, appear promising. As does the hiring of Mr. Yazbek and his contemporaries. For now, a measure of youthful unpredictability is quietly infiltrating Broadway.

Drawing (Nicholas Gaetano)