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THEATER

## THEATER; Trying to Keep the Sound of Musicals Alive

By BARRY SINGER

THIS is a story about new musicals -- an ephemeral art form -- and the recordings that make them endure.

Theater critics have not been kind to new musicals in recent years, nor have the musicals been especially kind to critics. You would hardly know that, though, by the quantities of original-cast albums that flood record stores and Internet music sites. Since "Rent" in 1995 -- the last show to garner anything close to unanimous critical praise -- dozens of new musicals have come and gone, on Broadway and Off, most to lackluster reviews. Yet so many of them are available on compact disk. How did these shows come to be recorded?

Some record industry people would say it is a long-term bet. Sales to the niche audience interested in new musicals (estimated by the industry at about 5,000 hardy souls) barely justify the cost of making a record. But any creative team, even signed at a loss, may one day produce a hit musical that will pay back expenses and garner a sizable profit. That is the gamble.

The reality, however, is that a handful of recording executives seem determined to preserve the sound of American musical theater -- even in its lean years, and without necessarily making a sizable profit. In musical terms, they want the song to continue, and they want the public to hear it.

On occasion, record companies have jumped on a hoped-for Broadway blockbuster purely for profit, as Sony did with "Side Show," which faltered two seasons back; and Atlantic seems to have virtually turned over its musical-theater division to the pop composer Frank Wildhorn ("Jekyll and Hyde," "The Scarlet Pimpernel").

But in fact, a significant majority of recent cast albums have been produced by just three people operating at very different companies: Bill Rosenfield, senior vice president for shows and soundtracks at RCA Victor; Bruce Kimmel, a vice president and producer at Varese Sarabande, a Los Angeles label largely devoted to film soundtracks, and, to a lesser but no less influential extent, Robert Hurwitz, the president of Nonesuch Records.

Mr. Rosenfield, 45, is the executive behind the widest range of original cast recordings, from big-budget extravaganzas like "Ragtime" to nontraditional works like "Bring In da Noise/Bring In da Funk," "A New Brain" and Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins."

His reasons for recording a particular show often come down to one word: "Relationships," he emphasized in a recent interview in his Broadway office overlooking Times Square. "We know that to get the smashes down the road, there have to be relationships established with promising composers early on."

For its part, Nonesuch is better known for recording classical music eccentrics and world music eclectics, like the artists on "The Buena Vista Social Club," its hit Cuban music CD. But Mr. Hurwitz, 50, also speaks about relationships when he explains his commitment to the celebrated actress and singer Audra McDonald and the rising young composer Adam Guettel, two highly promising if commercially unproven prospects from the world of musical theater. His label has released three recordings reflecting their work: Ms. McDonald's solo debut album, "Way Back to Paradise," and the musical "Floyd Collins" as well as the song cycle "Myths and Hymns" by Mr. Guettel.

"In every area in which we record," Mr. Hurwitz said in his midtown office, "I look to establish long-term relationships with artists whose talent is so big the world eventually is going to come around. It would be very risky for me to work with Adam and Audra if I was just going to work on one record. Fortunately, for the price of a medium-size Broadway musical, I can work with them both for the next 10 years."

He added: "Fifteen years ago, I knew I wanted Nonesuch involved in musical theater because I've always loved it. But I'm very patient. I was waiting for someone's work that I loved."

On the West Coast, Mr. Kimmel, 51, has carved out his own turf by recording smaller musicals that are mostly produced Off Broadway. These include "Bed and Sofa," a show at the Vineyard Theater in 1996 by the minimalist Polly Pen, and this season's critically lambasted "After the Fair" by Matthew Ward and Stephen Cole, produced by the York Theater.

"If I love something and believe it's going to have a life, then I do it," Mr. Kimmel said. "We've done the occasional Broadway show, like the last revival of 'The King and I.' They can run as much as \$250,000 to record. Off Broadway musicals cost us in the early teens and up. They sell anywhere from 4,000 copies. Still, most break even. And for the littlest musicals, having a record really helps generate stock and amateur productions."

Andrew Lippa, a young composer-lyricist whose musical "The Wild Party" opens in February at the Manhattan Theater Club (one of two competing productions of "The Wild Party" this season), was glad to have his first produced show, "Jon and Jen," preserved by Mr. Kimmel in 1995. "The recording stamped legitimacy on the whole thing," Mr. Lippa said. "It made me feel like a writer."

"Did I make any money from the record?" he asked rhetorically. "No. If not for Bruce, though, a lot of people wouldn't have records. Bruce works very quickly and very cheaply, but he does them. We did ours in one day."

Edgar Bronfman Jr., the chief executive of the Seagram company, is a musical-theater fan, it turns out.

At Mr. Bronfman's direction, all of the wholly owned labels of his Universal Music Group that possess musical-theater catalogues have been merged into one musical-theater division. This includes Decca, the first record company to make an original cast album ("Oklahoma!" in 1943). Perhaps that is why the new entity has been named Decca Broadway.

It is Mr. Bronfman's intention, said Chris Roberts, his president for classics and jazz, who will oversee Decca Broadway, to pursue new musical-theater recording projects. "We're not just going to sweep in and spend a lot of money," Mr. Roberts said. "This isn't about status. This is about love of an art form. It's about growing young artists."

Of the four major new musicals announced for Broadway so far this season -- the Bee Gees' "Saturday Night Fever," which begins previews late next month; the musicalization of "Jane Eyre" by the pop songwriter Paul Gordon, expected to open next year; the Walt Disney Company's reworked "Aida," with a score by Elton John and Tim Rice, scheduled for April, and Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's "Wise Guys," which, pending its workshop in November, is expected to open in the spring - only "Aida" at this point has an American record contract. It will be recorded by Walt Disney Records, of course.

Nonesuch, Varese Sarabande and RCA Victor are focused elsewhere for now. Mr. Rosenfield said he would like to record "Wise Guys" and both productions of "The Wild Party," while Nonesuch awaits an encore from Mr. Guettel. His "Floyd Collins," with its much admired score, was done Off Broadway in 1995. It has just ended a tour of regional theaters and may return to New York, this time to Broadway. Mr. Guettel, meanwhile, is working on his next piece, a musical based on an Elizabeth Spencer novella, "The Light in the Piazza."

As for Michael John LaChiusa, whose 1994 "Hello Again" at Lincoln Center was recorded by Mr. Rosenfield at RCA and whose songs are among the pleasures of Ms. McDonald's CD, he is on the verge of a possible breakthrough season. After nearly a decade of apprenticeship as one of musical theater's more iconoclastic young talents, Mr. LaChiusa expects to have back-to-back world premieres, both on Broadway.

"Marie Christine," the Creole retelling of "Medea" which he wrote for Ms. McDonald, opens at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in December. (Mr. Rosenfield is recording it for RCA.) That show will be followed by the season's second New York take on "The Wild Party," this one with music and lyrics by Mr. LaChiusa and a book by him and George C. Wolfe, the producer of the Joseph Papp Public Theater. The \$5 million production is going straight to Broadway with a high-profile cast that may include Vanessa Williams, Mandy Patinkin and Eartha Kitt.

Is it too much to suggest that Mr. LaChiusa's arrival on Broadway this season, and possibly that of Mr. Guettel, could signal a new era for musical theater's next generation?

Probably. Broadway taste has rarely seemed more retrograde, as the industry cozies up to retread movie soundtrack musicals like the current "Footloose" and the forthcoming "Saturday Night Fever," while long-running British shows, like overstuffed dinner guests, simply refuse to go home.

"That's the single most important reason new young composers can't break through on Broadway," Mr. Rosenfield said. "Too many dead shows just taking up space."

According to Wiley Hausam, an associate producer in charge of musical-theater development at the Public, the future of the American musical resides not on Broadway at all but rather in opera houses. "Opera companies embracing new musical-theater artists," Mr. Hausam said, "that's where the next generation of great musicals is going to come from."

Yet isn't there something disconcerting about this quintessentially populist American invention disappearing into the rarefied precincts of opera? The need to engage the widest possible audience has always allowed musical theater a healthy lack of pretension.

One promising young composer who appears capable of straddling these two worlds is Peter Foley. Born in Berkeley, Calif., he attended Yale University determined to become a composer with an emphasis on choral writing. But the state of Broadway musical theater depressed him once he moved to New York in 1990. Eventually, Mr. Foley sat down and wrote a science fiction musical he called "The Hidden Sky," best sung, he concedes, by a cast of 30 but quickly cut to the minimum he believes his music can sustain: 12 voices.

In March, the influential Philadelphia institution formerly known as the American Music Theater Festival (now renamed the Prince Music Theater in honor of the director Harold Prince) will present "The Hidden Sky."

Mr. Foley will be keeping company with an eclectic group. Also part of the Prince season is an adaptation of "The Snow Queen" by the classical composer Richard Peaslee and the poet Adrien Mitchell (in December). Before that, "Running Man" by Diedre Murray and Cornelius Eady, produced last season in New York at HERE by the Music Theater Group, will be reprised in Philadelphia (Oct. 22-Nov. 7). The Music Theater Group hopes to reopen the show in New York, where it received praise for both the production and Ms. Murray's jazz-inflected score.

For Mr. Foley, the future is clear. "I want to write musicals that make people glad they pushed themselves out of the house that night and for some reason went to the theater," he said. "I want to write shows that make people's week."

No one from musical theater's younger generation has yet rivaled the success of Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, who, with "Once on This Island" in 1990 and with their Tony Award-winning score for the current musical "Ragtime" (both recorded by Mr. Rosenfield for RCA), truly have managed to make it on Broadway.

But the bankruptcy proceedings engulfing Garth Drabinsky, the former head of Livent and producer of "Ragtime," have taken their toll. "It has been a really rough year," Ms. Ahrens acknowledged recently. "In terms of musical theater, I now know far more about bankruptcy law than I ever hoped to."

SHE and Mr. Flaherty just concluded a four-week workshop for Livent of their new musical, "The

Seussical," based on the books of Dr. Seuss. It is the last vestige of Livent's involvement in the show. In September, "The Seussical" will become the bankruptcy-sale property of one of Broadway's biggest corporate players, the Pace Theatrical Group, which itself is owned by the giant SFX Entertainment Inc., a producer of live music, theater and sporting events.

Livent's problems affected an artist on another show as well, illustrating a fact of life on Broadway. As the corporate presence increases and as resources for institutional theaters wane, nonprofits can sometimes enter into bargains of inconvenience with commercial producers while trying to create adventurous musical theater.

Last season, Lincoln Center Theater found itself stranded when the \$5 million musical "Parade," produced in association with Livent, received mixed reviews and Livent and Mr. Drabinsky became embroiled in financial woes. As a result, according to Mr. Rosenfield at RCA Victor, "Parade" nearly lost its informal agreement with his company for a cast album.

Jason Robert Brown, the young composer-lyricist of "Parade," who won a Tony for his score and has a commission from Lincoln Center Theater to write a new musical, said he is still upset by what happened.

"Livent dropped out shortly after the reviews came out," Mr. Brown said. "They announced they would not spend another dime on the show. RCA had an agreement to record all of Livent's shows. But when Livent pulled out of 'Parade,' the RCA higher-ups said they were pulling out, too. I had to go to Billy Rosenfield and ask him: 'What if we pay for this record and you just distribute it?' Billy said, 'Sure.' "

Andre Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, emphasized: "We were determined to make the album, even though, God knows, we could ill afford to do it. We canvassed everyone for money, including some of our board members."

Mr. Brown enlisted all those he could think of as well. "In the end," he said, "RCA put in \$25,000, Lincoln Center put in a big chunk, around \$200,000, including the producer Scott Rudin's \$25,000, and there was a contribution from the Gilman and Gonzalez-Falla foundation, which has helped support a lot of musical theater composers over the years, of \$40,000. Even Roy Furman, the new guy at Livent, gave us a little money. Somehow, we pulled it together."

Tim Sanford, the artistic director at Playwrights Horizons, is a realist when it comes to other people's money. "We would never be able to do musicals if there weren't commercial producers attached," he said.

This season his theater is mounting a musical play and a full-fledged musical. The first, "The Dead" (opening in October), is an adaptation by the playwright Richard Nelson of the James Joyce story, with extensive incidental music by the Irish composer Shaun Davey. The second, "The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin," is a new musical by a first-time composer-lyricist-librettist, Kirsten Childs, a former actress and Fosse dancer. It arrives in May.

"You couldn't get a job in the 70's in musical theater if you were black," Ms. Childs said recently, "unless you had your hand on your hip and were wagging your head. It might be a hair better now, but not much. I guess that's why I finally started to write a musical myself."

"The Dead" came to Playwrights Horizons via the Broadway producers Gregory Mosher and Arielle Tepper, who had presented John Leguizamo's "Freak." They were seeking an Off Broadway partner for their latest commercial venture after an earlier plan to rent the Vivian Beaumont Theater fell through.

But "The Bubbly Black Girl," about a young girl growing up in Los Angeles in the 1960's and 70's, was a show that Playwrights pursued. "I was blown away when I first heard it last summer at the Eugene O'Neill theater festival," said Ira Weitzman, the associate producer for musical theater at Playwrights.

Others were interested, including the Manhattan Theater Club, the Public Theater and the Vineyard Theater. Also interested was Wind Dancer Productions, a company formed by Matt Williams, who created "Home Improvement" and "Roseanne" and was the executive producer of "The Cosby Show." Not surprisingly, Wind Dancer won the rights to "The Bubbly Black Girl," with Playwrights Horizons designated as the theater in which it would be developed.

Essentially, "The Bubbly Black Girl" now has two producers: one with a lot of money and experience in television, the other with little money and a lot of experience in creating new musicals. This would not have been the case as recently as the early 1990's. Until then, according to Mr. Sanford, Playwrights Horizons "consistently received charitable donations for musical-theater development, not co-production deals." Decisions about everything to do with a new musical, he said, right down to which record label would record a show, were made by the theater alone, not jointly with the donor. Over the last few years, though, that has changed. And it is why when the time comes to decide who will record "The Bubbly Black Girl" the final decision will be Wind Dancer's.

"I do wish," Mr. Sanford said, "that the commercial theater community and everybody with an interest in musical theater would give Playwrights a subsidy for development of new musicals with no strings attached. But they just don't do that anymore."

### It's Wild: Two 'Wild Parties'

THE hedonists in "The Wild Party" will be seducing one another twice this season. Why? Two nonprofit theaters in New York are making separate musicals out of Joseph Moncure March's 1928 satirical verse epic, set in the Roaring Twenties, that begins: "Queenie was a blonde, and her age stood still,/And she danced twice a day in vaudeville."

The roughly \$1 million Manhattan Theater Club version is by Andrew Lippa, 34, a composer-lyricist and now librettist, who found a copy of the poem nearly four years ago in a bookstore and was so hooked that he read most of the text on the spot. Mr. Lippa brought his idea for the show to Lee Johnson, the director of musical theater at M.T.C., who encouraged him.

After several readings, beginning in 1996, a workshop held last April and May resulted in a

commitment by M.T.C. to produce the show *Off Broadway* in February 2000, directed by Gabriel Barre. Mr. Lipa's childhood friend Jeffrey Seller, an original producer of "Rent," and Mr. Seller's business partner, Kevin McCollum, have the commercial rights to the show, should it transfer.

Meanwhile, the Joseph Papp Public Theater's \$5 million version is by Michael John LaChiusa, 37, a composer-lyricist and librettist. Mr. LaChiusa read "The Wild Party" at a friend's suggestion some years ago and put the book on his shelf of possible future projects. When the Public Theater offered him a residency in 1998 and the idea of a musical about show business was discussed, Mr. LaChiusa recalled "The Wild Party."

After an initial reading in the summer of 1998, the thought was to mount the show last season. But George C. Wolfe, the producer of the Public, who has written the libretto with Mr. LaChiusa, hopes to assemble the cast from a workshop held in February that included Vanessa Williams, Mandy Patinkin and Eartha Kitt. Almost immediately after that workshop it was decided to produce the "Wild Party," directed by Mr. Wolfe, this season and to do so on Broadway. March preview dates have been mentioned.

But didn't the Public Theater realize that the Manhattan Theater Club was embarked on a "Wild Party"? "I never consider another theater's schedule when creating my own," Mr. Wolfe said recently. "There's plenty of room for everybody's 'Wild Party.' "

(That would include the Studio Theater version done in Washington this summer and even the 1975 film of the same name, directed by James Ivory.)

And didn't the Manhattan Theater Club realize it would be bucking a possibly star-filled Broadway show when it decided to press on? "We don't view doing our work as bucking anything," said Lynne Meadow, the club's artistic director. "I think it's interesting that two artists, quite independent of each other, were attracted by the same story. Personally, I'm curious to see both 'Wild Parties.' "

As Mr. LaChiusa sees it, "The poem is so hot and sexy, it's no wonder everyone wants to set it to music."

Mr. Lipa was slightly more emphatic: "You can either roll over and play dead or fight to the death. No, I don't think of it as a war. Still, now that it's actually happening, I just say bring 'em on."

## BARRY SINGER

Photos: Recordings of new musicals have become a staple, even if some don't make a profit. Above, Robert Hurwitz, president of Nonesuch Records, in his Manhattan office. (Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times) Far left, Bill Rosenfield, senior vice president for shows and soundtracks at RCA Victor, in his office, also in Manhattan. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times) Left, a workshop at Playwrights Horizons of a forthcoming show, "The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin." (Joan Marcus/"The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin")(pg. 5); Kirsten Childs, whose new musical, "The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin," opens in May at Playwrights Horizons.

(Ruby Washington/The New York Times); Andrew Lippa, whose musical "The Wild Party" opens in February Off Broadway. (Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times); Michael John LaChiusa, whose version of "The Wild Party" is expected to open on Broadway. (Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)(pg. 19)