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THEATER

THEATER; Pop Self-Consciousness Finally Infiltrates Broadway

By BARRY SINGER

LAST season, "The Producers" marched the Broadway musical resolutely backward in time. The shtick, the "girls" (both young and old), the tunes, the governing taste, were all determinedly old-school. Audiences loved it. So did the critics. As the screenwriter and longtime theatrical observer William Goldman put it in *Variety*: "Come back to the theater. All is forgiven."

Yet there was something even more noteworthy than the show's retro aesthetic: "The Producers" injected a powerful dose of the values and entertainment style of contemporary popular culture into Broadway's static, isolationist environs.

"The Producers" is a musical about making a musical that laughs at itself for being a musical. This ironic self-reflexivity is what Jerry Seinfeld did to the sitcom, what David Letterman does to the talk show, what reality programming has done to the act of watching television. It is what Dave Eggers did in "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," his solipsistic memoir; it is what hip-hop does to pop music every time it "samples."

Recently, it is what the Australian movie director Baz Luhrmann did to that all-American form, the movie musical, in "Moulin Rouge," his self-consciously anachronistic film about bohemian love in fin-de-siècle Paris, with a score consisting almost entirely of 20th-century pop songs.

Musical theater is arriving late to this game, but that is musical theater's inherent relationship to contemporary pop culture: it has for a while now, with rare exceptions, been stupendously out of touch. Still, for better or worse, that stagnancy is slowly shifting, as a series of recent interviews and a look at this season's musical offerings attest. The creative outcome remains unknown. Pessimists, however, may not be reassured.

Mr. Luhrmann, who is scheduled to make his Broadway directorial debut this spring with a new version of his Italian-language production of "La Bohème" by Puccini, first staged in Australia in 1990, believes that the use of irony can increase an entertainment's pleasures.

"Irony, to me, in the cinema or in the theater, means you can laugh and cry at the same time at the same thing," he said by telephone from Australia. "You can take something very trashy, turn it -- and

from another angle see that it has another function entirely. I think ironic edge absolutely can be alive in the musical theater. Having said that, the requirements are quite different. Slap an ironic gesture on 'La Bohème' and you're layering silliness upon silliness."

Too much silliness, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. An Off Broadway parallel last season to the success story of "The Producers" was the Obie Award-winning "Urinetown: The Musical," which this season will attempt to give "The Producers" a run for at least some of its money when it reopens in September, this time on Broadway, at the Henry Miller theater (the former home of the Roundabout Theater Company's grungy post-modernist revival of "Cabaret").

From its name and subject matter (corrupt big business takes over a drought-stricken city's public restrooms and charges exorbitant fees) to its thematic substance and performance style, "Urinetown" taps the same ironic currents of popular culture as "The Producers." But it amplifies them. Where "The Producers" flirts with vulgarity, "Urinetown" sings about urinating. Where "The Producers" garners laughs by occasionally acknowledging out loud what it takes to make a musical, "Urinetown" never stops laughing at the fact that it is a musical.

Are audiences today -- at least the younger members -- so inherently embarrassed by musicals that only pre-emptive, reflexive laughter can induce them to listen? The creators of "Urinetown" -- its composer and lyricist, Mark Hollmann, 37, and its book writer and lyricist, Greg Kotis, 35 -- seem to think so. "I just figured this futuristic idea I had about corporations controlling where you could urinate was so bad it had to be a musical," Mr. Kotis said. "There's a ridiculousness about people breaking into song every few minutes that is both wonderful and terrible at the same time."

Mr. Hollmann added: "During our development period, people would point out such profound problems with the show, flaws that we soon realized had no remedy, that our only avenue of escape was to say: 'We can't fix that, but maybe if we let the audience know we know, they'll let us off the hook.' "

Not surprising, there is an audience for grossly ironic, post-modernist musicals. Mr. Kotis said he and his "Urinetown" collaborators discovered that "people are much hungrier for this kind of material than we ever thought." America's most popular cartoon, "The Simpsons" by Matt Groening, often sings ironically. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, creators of the irreverent "South Park," made their cartoon's first feature-length film a musical. Before that, Mr. Parker wrote the words and music for his own perverse movie musical, "Cannibal! The Musical," which had a run Off Off Broadway in a stage adaptation last season.

Another exercise in irony that opened Off Broadway last season was the musical "Bat Boy," derived from a tabloid newspaper story about a boy found in a cave who was supposedly half-bat. "Bat Boy" has been celebrating its own silliness at the Union Square Theater with over-the-top production numbers that lacerate the musical theater form. Meanwhile, the self-eviscerating pop musical film parody "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" lives on in its Broadway incarnation from last season, "The Rocky Horror Show."

A contemporary cultural critic, the novelist and editor Kurt Andersen, finds all of this pretty funny. "The fact that self-referential irony is only now reaching the musical theater just as it's receding in other media into some post-ironic something, strikes me as, well, amusing," he said. "I don't get musicals. My favorite moments in 'Moulin Rouge' were when it kidded itself. In fact, I wish Luhrmann had gone further than he did. I bought 'Moulin Rouge,' though, mostly because I just wasn't bored. I mean, 'Show Boat' bored me silly."

In terms of audience enthusiasm, the musical "Mamma Mia!" is said to have an advance sale of more than \$20 million. A package of disco-era hits by the Swedish vocal group Abba draped around a book best characterized as a paternity whodunit set on a Greek island, the show is moving into the former Broadway residence of "Cats," the Winter Garden Theater. A major hit in London, it opens on Broadway in October.

"Mamma Mia!" deploys its own deconstructive spin. By painstakingly reconstituting Abba's catchy pop singles down to the last harmonic inflection, the show invites audiences to see right through the musical they have paid to attend (like "The Producers," the top ticket price is \$100) and just sing along, as if with their radios at home. Quite a post-modernist touch.

As the show's director, Phyllida Lloyd, told The Los Angeles Times, " 'Mama Mia!' is actually quite Brechtian in calling attention to form and the relationship the audience develops with characters onstage." In other words, here is a musical that laughs at itself perhaps less overtly than "Urinetown" and "The Producers" but just as decisively.

Musicals that laugh at themselves for being musicals are not entirely a new commodity. One of the first to begin to do so was the Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart 1962 hit, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." "We can't take complete credit for breaking down the wall," Mr. Gelbart said recently from California, "but we did address the audience directly in a very George Burns-ian way. More and more, though, I think that sort of stuff actually reflects a diminished interest on the part of the audience in anything other than show business and, by inference, celebrity. Everybody wants to go backstage now; to be inside."

Show business and celebrity are the subject of one of the season's most anticipated Broadway musicals, "Sweet Smell of Success," adapted from the 1957 film noir with Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis about New York press agents and gossip columnists. Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman wrote the screenplay.

Only in an era as cynical and yet ravenous for celebrity as the present one could such a bleak movie about celebrity be considered suitable for song. With music by Marvin Hamlisch, lyrics by Craig Carnelia, a book by John Guare and a star turn by John Lithgow as the Walter Winchell-surrogate, J. J. Hunsecker, the show opens in March, under the direction of Nicholas Hytner.

"It's a good time to do this," said Mr. Lithgow, whose just-canceled television series, "Third Rock From the Sun," was itself a post-modernist sitcom. " 'Sweet Smell of Success' was a movie years ahead of its time," he added. "It's a piece just dripping with irony. In our version, every musical number has some

sort of incredibly ironic undertow. It really makes the darkness gleam."

MUSIC is the realm in which musical theater over the last 35 years has fallen farthest out of the contemporary cultural loop -- "Hair," "Rent" and "Bring In da Noise/ Bring In da Funk" are among the exceptions. Not even "Urinetown" addresses this disconnection, its satirical musical palette falling along musical theater's Brecht-Weill continuum. Only David Yazbek's score for "The Full Monty" last season managed to introduce a hint of contemporary pop to the Broadway musical. Revealingly, it was overtaken in the Tony Award competition by the retro juggernaut of "The Producers."

One Off Broadway musical this season will be derived from contemporary popular culture, but in an entirely different way. "Brutal Imagination," by the poet Cornelius Eady and the jazz-inspired composer Diedre Murray, whose "Running Man" two seasons back was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, is a musical drama taken from fairly recent headlines and set to music removed from the recycled norm. The piece, scheduled to open in January at the Vineyard Theater, tells the story of Susan Smith, the South Carolina woman who drowned her children in a submerged car. The musical brings to life the imaginary black man who she had said had abducted her sons.

"We're trying to show another way of telling a story that's very American," Ms. Murray said. "Is it ironic? I suppose so, inevitably. But for me it's more about, 'Why are people singing when they're onstage?' Cornelius and I don't answer that question holistically. We're trying to create more of a waking dream."

With a score plucked if not directly from the pop cultural mainstream then from a near tributary, Lincoln Center Theater's first musical this season, "Thou Shalt Not," opens on Broadway in October. Based on "Thérèse Raquin," the classic Émile Zola tale of murderous adultery, the show is a collaboration between the Tony Award-winning director and choreographer Susan Stroman ("The Producers" and "Contact") and the composer-lyricist Harry Connick Jr. As a jazz pianist, pop singer and actor, Mr. Connick has managed to straddle the mainstream without quite giving himself up to it. His arrival on Broadway as a composer seems in many ways the sort of bridge that musical theater could use right now.

"There's just something about songs from musicals," Mr. Connick said backstage at the Vivian Beaumont Theater. "They're grounded, they're structurally very sound, they mean something. Ironically, I keep hearing the comment about my music: 'Oh, how fresh. That doesn't sound anything like Sondheim.' Well, that's because Sondheim hasn't directly influenced me at all. Which may be ignorance on my part, but I wonder if a lot of young songwriters for theater today aren't starting with Sondheim and getting stuck there. I'm not interested in that, for just that reason. Not to disrespect Stephen Sondheim. I can only hope to achieve what he has. But you have to study the history from the beginning, not just the middle or the end; you have to try and understand what and how the early masters all did what they did. That's how you arrive at an expression that's entirely your own."

Mr. Sondheim's influence on the modern, if not post-modern, musical is indisputable. Both "Thou Shalt Not" and "Sweet Smell of Success" -- musicals with murder in their hearts, musicals that are

post-modernist in at least subject matter -- could not have existed without Mr. Sondheim's seminal creation of "Sweeney Todd." Moreover, Mr. Sondheim is a musical theater pioneer on the subject of irony. There is a difference, though, between the irony expressed by the creators of "Follies" and "Urinetown." Where the former exemplifies emotional engagement, the latter is defined by emotional disengagement.

Can a musical truly sing without emotional engagement? Mr. Luhrmann, the cinematic champion of the emotionally detached, ironic singing in "Moulin Rouge," looks at musical theater somewhat differently from film. "The pop cultural layering in my films is specific to the films," he said. "With 'La Bohème,' we're going to do the reverse. Where we've tried to theatricalize naturalistic cinematic language, 'La Bohème' will be less theatrical and more cinematic. The performers will look very realistic; for one thing, they will actually be young. Plus, we've reset the story in 1957, because 1957 had all the social and economic realities we needed to match the 1840's.

"There is irony, of course, just in the whole notion of 'La Bohème' being moved to this period, but not in the way audiences understand irony in my movies. They're all about being in on the jokes. Here, rather than being layered, 'La Bohème' will be a straight study in very traditional 1950's drama. Yet it's told through a pure operatic voice. That clash creates your irony."

But why the need for that clash at all? Has irony become the chaser audiences require in order to swallow any sort of musical theater entertainment?

"Well, yes," Mr. Luhrmann replied. "Irony is one very good way to force an audience's engagement these days."

Mr. Gelbart agreed, in a sense. "I think the feeling is that a modern audience doesn't want to see people just break out into song anymore. Remember, an audience's idea of a musical number is no longer Fred and Ginger anyway. It's Britney."

John Cameron Mitchell, the creator and star of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" -- both the ironic rock musical that ran Off Broadway and the recently released film adaptation -- believes there is room for anything. "Musicals are just songs and a narrative onstage," he said. "And there can be all kinds. The tradition is sturdy enough. I don't think there's anything bad about this. The only bad thing is if they're done badly. Ultimately, it's taste I'm more worried about."

STILL, is it possible that abject self-reflexivity could mean the end of the line for musical theater history, at least as it has been known? Or must the tradition finally laugh itself out before something new can be born?

Ira Weitzman, Lincoln Center Theater's longtime associate producer for musical theater, doesn't think the situation is that dire. "I don't know that self-reflexivity is even a trend," he said. "I certainly don't think that the people who wrote 'Urinetown' are doomed to a life of self-parody."

The people who wrote "Urinetown" are not so sure. "When I start to think about writing a musical

seriously," Mr. Kotis said, "I think----"

Mr. Hollmann finished the thought: "Why bother?"

Mr. Gelbart can answer that: "You know what? Making fun of yourself is just easier than writing plot. It's easier than creating character. It's easier than creating situations. Still, it's hardly my place to talk about creating new anything, at least not in the context of 'Forum.' Because, admittedly, in our plot, characters and situations, we made sure that not only the author but the whole civilization we stole from was dead."

Breaking Into Song...

Pop culture's influence is unmistakable this season on a number of musicals scheduled for Broadway and off. Here is a selective list.

* "THE SPITFIRE GRILL" Based on the 1996 film (financed by the Roman Catholic Church) about a young woman -- a former convict -- and her quest for a new life. A Playwrights Horizons production, the contemporary folk score has music by James Valcq and lyrics by Fred Alley. Both men wrote the book. (Opens Oct. 2, the Duke on 42nd Street.)

* "REEFER MADNESS!" A kitschy transplant from Los Angeles that musicalizes, "Urinetown"-style, the notorious 1936 marijuana fright film of the same name. Music by Dan Studney, lyrics by Kevin Murphy (both men wrote the book) and choreography by the MTV stalwart Paula Abdul. (Opens Oct. 7, Variety Arts.)

* "THE LAST FIVE YEARS" The latest work from Jason Robert Brown, the young Tony Award-winning composer of "Parade," with a score that embraces pop music far more overtly. The book, a two-character examination of a contemporary marriage's disintegration, is by the composer. (March, Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center.)

* "THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE" A remake of the 1960's film that, despite its Roaring Twenties setting, blurs the boundaries of period style with a score of authentic vintage standards that are mixed with songs from the movie and new tunes by the composer Jeanine Tesori and the lyricist Dick Scanlan. The first run was at the La Jolla Playhouse in California last winter. (April, Broadway, at a theater to be announced.)

* "DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES" Adapted from Roman Polanski's 1967 film "The Fearless Vampire Killers," this unapologetically campy new show has music by Jim Steinman -- best known for his work with the singer Meat Loaf. (April, Broadway, Minskoff Theater.)

* "BY JEEVES" The exception that proves the rule: a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber, with book and lyrics by Alan Ayckbourn, based on the Jeeves stories of P. G. Wodehouse, that ignores contemporary pop culture almost completely. (Opens Oct. 28, Broadway, Helen Hayes.)

BARRY SINGER

Photos: BROADWAY BOUND -- Louise Pitre, top, who will appear in the Abba musical "Mamma Mia!" this season, performed in the Toronto production last year; John Lithgow, center left, and Brian d'Arcy James, will star in a musical version of "Sweet Smell of Success," adapted from the 1957 movie of the same name; Susan Stroman, the director, above, and Harry Connick Jr., the composer of "Thou Shalt Not," based on the Zola novel "Thérèse Raquin," at a rehearsal at Lincoln Center Theater this month. (Joan Marcus [top]; Nigel Parry [center]; Paul Kolnik for The New York Times [above])(pg. 3); The director Baz Luhrmann on the set of "La Bohème" in Australia. (Douglas Kirkland); Erin Matthews in "Reefer Madness!," coming to Off Broadway. (D. J. Viola)(pg. 10)
