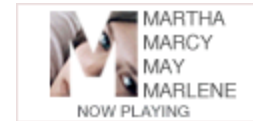


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THEATER

# THEATER; Jumping In, As Exposed As the Cast

By BARRY SINGER

IT'S easy to overlook David Yazbek, the composer and lyricist responsible for the music that has made "The Full Monty" a new musical. Not only is he a Broadway novice, Mr. Yazbek is also laboring in the shadow of his own show's widely advertised male strippers. Behind all that onstage exposure, though, a composer is waiting to be discovered. And now, with "The Full Monty," opening on Thursday at the Eugene O'Neill Theater, perhaps he will be.

Seated in a crowded Starbucks on Upper Broadway recently, Mr. Yazbek, 40, tried to answer a few fundamental questions. "Who am I?" he began. "Well, I'm a guy with a wife and a kid and a band called Yazbek. I have a marginal career as a recording artist, these albums that no one buys: one called 'The Laughing Man,' which didn't sell here but did in other countries, and the other called 'Tock,' which didn't sell here and was never released in other countries. I have this little cult fan base -- of guys mostly, who all look, well, like me: chubby with glasses, in T-shirts. And I once wrote comedy for David Letterman."

How did that happen?

"They hired me."

As Mr. Yazbek put it, he "sat in a cubicle, pounding out funny" for Mr. Letterman's "Late Night" show for a little less than a year. "I hated it," he said. "I realized I really needed music."

Born and brought up in New York, the son of a father who was a clothing designer and a mother "who was just my mother," Mr. Yazbek has always been a self-avowed "rock music snob."

"As a kid, I was interested in musical theater because my parents were," he said. "But that passed." In college, as if anticipating his future Broadway debut, he directed a revival of "Hair" -- "to see if I could get away with having people naked onstage."

In addition to his many rock 'n' roll influences -- particularly the band XTC and its primary songwriter, Andy Partridge -- Mr. Yazbek nursed one guilty musical-theater vice: a weakness for the songs of Frank Loesser. "I've always loved Loesser," he said. "That unbelievably catchy

little counterpoint melody line he uses in 'Standin' on the Corner'? I've applied that kind of riff to everything I've ever written, in a way. I've just always thought that was way cool."

Recognizing Loesser's artistry may be one thing, but how did Mr. Yazbek wind up on Broadway?

"A very sophisticated garage band did it," he said. "Just after Letterman, I was in this band called Barn, with a bass player named Adam Guettel, who also happened to be the grandson of Broadway royalty, the composer Richard Rodgers." Mr. Guettel, the composer of the musical "Floyd Collins" and the song cycle "Saturn Returns," is regarded as one of American musical theater's most promising young talents.

"Adam seems to have been the first person considered by the producers of 'The Full Monty' " for writing the score, Mr. Yazbek said. "He turned them down but recommended me."

Mr. Yazbek shrugged. "I remember asking Adam whether I should go to one of those workshops, you know, to learn the basics of musical-theater writing. And he started screaming at me: 'Whatever you do, don't do that! Just jump in, jump in over your head! Start writing!' "

Mr. Yazbek submitted his two slow-selling CD's as audition material and a few demonstration songs written for the show. To his amazement, he got the job. He began working with the book writer Terrence McNally and the director Jack O'Brien on the production, which opened first at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego.

Lindsay Law, the lead producer of "The Full Monty," said the choice was a conscious gamble. (Mr. Law was president of Fox Searchlight Pictures when the company produced the 1997 film of "The Full Monty.") "This is a contemporary show," Mr. Law said by telephone from Los Angeles. "The people on our stage are dealing with real life today. So the idea was, could we find somebody whose music sounded that contemporary and that real? Which pretty much eliminated just about everybody writing for Broadway today. David's music immediately impressed me with its warmth and his incredible sense of humor. But it was a bit scary, betting it all on David. As it has turned out, though, I got much more than I'd even bargained for."

At Starbucks, Mr. Yazbek said that he, too, had had doubts. "What did I think at first? Honestly? I thought: 'Great. Another cheesy Broadway adaptation of a movie.'"

And what does he think now?

He grinned broadly. "Well, now I think, 'Hey, this could really be good.' "

Drawing: Patrick Wilson, in foreground, and other cast members of the musical "The Full Monty," which opens on Thursday.

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