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THEATER

THEATER; Dancing All Night, Writing All Day

By BARRY SINGER

DEBRA BARSHA remembers the 80's in New York because she was there. She remembers Studio 54 because she was there, too. And she remembers Keith Haring, who died of AIDS in 1990, because, though they never met, she couldn't help running into his art in the New York City subways.

"I'd be in some station coming home late at night from dancing and there'd be this chalk figure on the wall -- no words," Ms. Barsha said. "My friend Ed told me some guy was actually drawing this stuff. 'Wait, that's art?' I thought. 'That is so fantastic. This is just the coolest place in the world to live!'"

Still, who could have foreseen that she would one day write a show about Keith Haring? "Radiant Baby," with music by Ms. Barsha, a book by Stuart Ross (the writer and director of "Forever Plaid") and lyrics by Ira Gasman, Mr. Ross and Ms. Barsha, is in previews at the Joseph Papp Public Theater under the direction of George C. Wolfe. The title refers to Haring, who was 31 when he died, and to one of his most iconic images, a crawling infant surrounded by rays of light.

The show, which traces Haring's life (he is portrayed by Daniel Reichard) from his childhood in Pennsylvania in the 60's to his move to New York in 1978 when he was 20, and his death a dozen years later, explores the enormous creative energy behind the graphic work, work that the artist always said spanned the worlds of high and low art.

At the time, both those worlds danced to the beat of disco, as Ms. Barsha's score for the show demonstrates. But it is not easy to sum up Ms. Barsha's musical style. Essentially, every form of pop music since the 1960's that has cumulatively eroded the pre-eminence of the Broadway musical -- rock 'n' roll, soul, funk, R&B, disco, rap -- all of these are her favorites. Now, nearly two decades after the so-called death of disco, Ms. Barsha's score for "Radiant Baby" integrates disco into an original book musical. One throbbing scene is set in a disco that Keith Haring frequented, the Paradise.

Is the Haring of "Radiant Baby" less fiercely hedonistic than the man himself was known to be, perhaps with an eye to the investment in the show by David Geffen's DreamWorks SKG and the musical's hoped-for commercial afterlife?

"I don't agree with the supposition that we've sanitized anything," Mr. Wolfe said recently. "But we're still in previews, so I'm not prepared to say, 'Oh, yeah, we do or we don't.' The show hasn't opened yet. We'll see."

Ms. Barsha, 43, animatedly told her own story the other day at a Midtown Manhattan restaurant. "Keith Haring had this dichotomy of a life, and so have I," she said. "I've worked on Wall Street, played piano bars, acted Off Broadway and sung backup for Parliament Funkadelic. I started writing songs when I was 13. My father was the anchor man on the news in Syracuse for 20 years. If we said the name Jerry Barsha, we could park anywhere in Syracuse, so I had the feeling I was famous from a very young age. Then, of course, I got outside the radius of the television station and no one knew who I was."

After a year at the Eastman School of Music, Ms. Barsha moved to New York. She was 18. "Nights, I sang all over, but mostly at this bar called Chelsea Place. I played disco piano; I brought a little drum machine and did Donna Summer, slipping my own songs in. One night, a bartender said to me, 'This guy Joe Layton is asking if you'd have a drink with him on your break.' I said, 'Who is he?' 'Well,' the bartender said, 'he basically directed all of Barbra Streisand's television specials, plus Bette Midler's 'Clams on the Half Shell' revue. I think you might want to go over there.' "

It was 1980, and Mr. Layton, who died in 1994, was then directing and choreographing the musical "Barnum" on Broadway. He came right to the point, Ms. Barsha recalled: " 'I don't know how to say this, but I'd like to make you a star.' I swear that is what Joe said to me. And sure enough, he tried."

Ms. Barsha even got a record deal with Columbia Records, though that, she said, was her own doing. "Bruce Lundval signed me and then left the company so the record never got made. After that I was in the original cast of 'Tony and Tina's Wedding' and, with my best friend, Mary Cleere Haran, I was in 'Home Fires,' which morphed into Charles Busch's 'Swingtime Canteen.' Then I wound up on tour with Thomas Dolby, this 80's 'She Blinded Me With Science' person. I dyed my hair pink and that's where George Clinton saw me and soon I was recording with him and Parliament Funkadelic. Then I got hired to write an original 'Funny Girl'-like musical about Sophie Tucker, which was produced at the Jewish Repertory Theater. I did a one-woman show called 'Go to Your Womb,' about my childhood versus my mother's version of my childhood. And I guess that's when Ira Gasman called."

Mr. Gasman, a veteran lyricist, best known now for his 1998 Tony-nominated work with Cy Coleman on the Broadway show "The Life," had begun to write a musical about Keith Haring in 1993.

"The woman I was living with at the time had gone to a bookstore talk by Haring's official biographer, John Gruen," Mr. Gasman said. "It was her feeling that there was a kinship between me and Keith Haring. How she sensed that, I have no idea. At the time, I didn't know Keith Haring from pickled herring.

"I read the book, though, and started working right away, foolishly ignoring getting approval for the project from Gruen and the Haring estate. I don't recommend that. Eventually, I did bring the script to Gruen, without music, and he gave it his blessing, unofficially."

"Now I needed a composer," Mr. Gasman added. "So I called my friend Joe Layton and Joe said to me, 'Ira, I know the perfect composer.' "

Ms. Barsha responded immediately. "The minute Ira Gasman said Keith Haring to me that first time, I flipped because this is what my life was like," she said. "I would write all day and then go to Studio 54 and dance. Steve Rubell looked at me one night outside Studio 54 -- he liked my gay friend Ed -- and he said: 'O.K., let her in with him. She's got too much makeup on, but she'll look good under the lights.'"

Ms. Barsha howled with laughter. "If Keith Haring's epitaph is written in the subway, I figure that mine is somehow right there in that sentence."

Radiant Baby

Joseph Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street.

In previews. Opening date to be announced.

Photos: Daniel Reichard, foreground above, as Keith Haring; right, Debra Barsha, who composed the music for "Radiant Baby."; Rhett G. George, in a body suit, being "painted" by Daniel Reichard, who portrays Keith Haring in the musical "Radiant Baby." (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)