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THEATER

## THEATER; A Briton Who's Mad About Musicals

By BARRY SINGER

I AM the cockeyed octopus," Ian Marshall Fisher said with a room-rattling laugh. "Optimist, that is! Like the song; a cockeyed optimist, of course. But as a child, listening to that song, octopus is what I heard."

Mr. Marshall Fisher is the impresario behind the long-running Lost Musicals series in London, which is as affectionately regarded there as is the Encores! concert musicals program at City Center in New York. Mr. Marshall Fisher has crossed the Atlantic for a fund-raising extravaganza, his Manhattan debut: a re-examination of the 1941 Cole Porter musical "Let's Face It."

The show, as staged by Mr. Marshall Fisher, with a cast including Becky Ann Baker, Linda Romoff and Jim Stanek, will be performed at the New-York Historical Society this evening and on Sept. 23 and 24 at 6:30 P.M. The concerts, Mr. Marshall Fisher said, will raise funds for Lost Musicals.

"I've been doing what I've been doing in London now for over a decade," the 45-year-old Mr. Marshall Fisher explained with an exuberance that the Midtown studio he has sublet could just barely contain. "The object of the exercise is to take the finest American theater writers and look at musicals that have been neglected or forgotten."

He went on: "I started with one piano and a group of actors in 1989 at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Within 18 months, the Barbican Center said to us, 'Pleeze come here,' and, while there, I began to experiment with original orchestrations using the Royal Philharmonic. I then thought West End theaters would be better, and we moved about, performing in many, before lovely Michael Kaiser, then the new American director of Covent Garden, contacted me to say he had this intimate new theater -- the Linbury -- within the newly renovated opera house. 'We won't charge you anything,' he said. 'We want you here. It's yours.' "

"Now, I've come to America for something of an intervention," Mr. Marshall Fisher went on, with barely a breath. "Here I am, 11 years on, having done some 60 different American musicals with some 900 different actors, mostly English. So, yes, there is the luxury, the luxury, in coming over of having actors open their mouths and my not having to say, 'Please stop rolling those r's!' I am fairly obsessive. Authenticity is what I'm after. But I do everything myself. I cast, I direct, I choose the venue, I choose the musical, I choose the musical director, I will even check violins, saxes: Do we have the right sound?"

Does the drummer have the right kit?"

Mr. Marshall Fisher finally paused. "I'm finding I need some time to myself," he said. "I work seven days a week. My art is my hobby, and the nature of it is very much not for profit. People don't get paid; we rely on a lot of help, kindness, generosity. And that's the way it is."

So, why, of all possible musicals, has he chosen "Let's Face It" for his American debut?

"Because it is a wonderful show that has ludicrously been lost," Mr. Marshall Fisher said. "And I think I know the reason why. It was written by Porter, with the book writers Herbert and Dorothy Fields, as a vehicle for Danny Kaye right after his grand discovery in 'Lady in the Dark.' It played for over 500 performances. Paramount bought the rights, then destroyed the piece in making the film, which gives the show its innate forgetability, I suspect. Plus people think it was a war show, because it is set in 1941 and it is all about soldiers.

"Still, why did I choose it?" he reiterated. "Because 'Let's Face It' is everything that a Broadway musical comedy at its best used to be. Not pastiche, not like today, where writers merely send things up, or shock people into laughter by going past good taste. Just music and a bit of wordplay to make people smile. That's all those writers were after. It's called delight."

Photo: Ian Marshall Fisher, a London impresario, is making his debut here with Cole Porter's "Let's Face It." (Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times)