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THEATER

THEATER; With a Song in Her Heart, Taking On the Stage (Again)

By BARRY SINGER

LAURA BENANTI seems too young to care so much about American musical theater. But she doesn't see it that way. "I was kind of born 40 years old," said the 21-year-old singer and actress who will be tackling her third musical in as many seasons when she opens on Tuesday in "Time and Again" at Stage II of the Manhattan Theater Club.

The show, with a small-scale two-piano pit band, and a large ensemble directed by Susan H. Schulman, is based on a cult favorite, the 1970 Jack Finney novel of the same name -- a mystery involving time-travel to 1880's New York. Jack Viertel has written the book and Walter Edgar Kennon the music and lyrics. Mr. Kennon, who wrote the music for the show "Herringbone," is a veteran of the BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop.

"I was always a little adult," Mr. Benanti went on, clutching a truly hefty bottle of water backstage during a recent rehearsal break. "Even as a little kid, I just couldn't understand why I was surrounded by all these kids. I took things very seriously."

But how does a "kid" today come to give her heart to Julie Andrews rather than, say, Britney Spears?

"I actually enjoy Britney Spears," Ms. Benanti said. "Not as a singer but as a performer. I just enjoy watching her. I think, 'You are so brave.'"

Whereas Ms. Spears's artistry roughly brings to mind, well, a Warhol soup can, Ms. Benanti, with her cascading dark curls and direct gray eyes, seems drawn from another era. Indeed, in "Time and Again" she plays Julia, an impoverished young woman who believes she has no choice but to marry an unstable, ambitious man (played by Christopher Innvar) until she meets the artist (Lewis Cleale) who has traveled back in time to find her.

"I've just always wanted to do this," Ms. Benanti said. "My mom is a voice teacher -- my voice teacher. I used to fall asleep under the piano while she gave lessons. Mom was also on Broadway when she was my age. It's definitely in my blood. My parents were in 'Brigadoon' on Broadway when I was a couple of years old. My mom understudied Fiona; her name at the time was Linda Vidnovic. And my dad played the lead."

Her dad would be Martin Vidnovic, the accomplished Broadway baritone. "My parents are divorced," Ms. Benanti said after a long pause. "My stepfather, who is my father, raised me. We moved to Jersey when I was 4 or 5. Kinnelon. It's very beautiful there, but I was so bored. That's when I really knew I wanted to be on Broadway."

At first, she had to wait. Then, in rapid succession, she won the Papermill Playhouse Rising Star Award at 16 (as the lead, of course, in her high school production of "Hello, Dolly!"); at 17, was cast as Rebecca Luker's understudy in the Broadway revival of "The Sound of Music"; at 19, took over from Ms. Luker as Maria von Trapp opposite Richard Chamberlain; and at 20, won a Tony nomination for her work last season in the Broadway musical "Swing!" That May she also appeared as Donna Murphy's sister, Eileen, in the Encores! production of "Wonderful Town" at City Center.

Ms. Schulman, who also directed "The Sound of Music," said she would never forget Ms. Benanti's audition for that show: "This kid walked in. And, yes, she was a very beautiful woman. And, yes, she sang beautifully. That's not so unusual. But Laura had a kind of emotional transparency -- the way she connected to the material, the way she inhabited the lyrics.

"She was there to audition for one of the nuns, for heaven's sake. 'Lovely, lovely,' I said. 'Could you just wait outside for a minute?' And then I turned to the producers, 'I know you think I'm out of my mind, but we've got to read this kid for the lead.' And we did. Gave her some lines, a cold reading. And the same thing happened. The connection was so visceral. It's just there -- a gift. Onstage is where she lives."

Ms. Benanti is not entirely unfazed by her progress so far. "It's funny," she said. "Sometimes I also feel like I'm 16. When I'm ignorant of the business practices behind the performance, that's when I feel 16. But more and more I'm having to learn the business end and it grosses me out.

"My parents didn't allow me to audition for any professional theater as a child and I fought them. I really wanted to be in commercials and television and stuff, and they were like, 'No.' So I played soccer and I did all the normal things. At the time, I was, literally, like, 'I hate you.' And now I look back and go, 'Thank you so much.' I had a childhood."

Today she also has decided notions about the musical theater business. On commercial producers who try to resuscitate inferior productions with infusions of television personalities: "If they took the money and started promoting real musical-theater performers, they would get that money back. If they'd promote some young talent the way they promote Cheryl Ladd, then that young talent would become bankable, and people would come to see him or her. I don't at all mean this to sound self-serving, but to me they just show a lack of judgment. Unless things change, musical theater is just going to become canned goods."

What about television and the movies?

Ms. Benanti looked pensive. "I have such a hard time with roles women are forced to take there," she said. "It's something that I don't want to perpetuate. Having a 14-year-old sister, I see what she's

watching -- all these teeny-boppers portrayed as promiscuous and their parents are fools, idiots. I don't understand the argument that it has no impact. I don't know how anyone can say that. Because you're so impressionable. I still am."

But can one have a socially responsible show business career? Isn't the very idea an oxymoron?

"If I can't, then I don't want it," Ms. Benanti said. "I'd rather do something else."

SHE hesitated for a moment and then went on. "That's why, after we close, I'm taking a self-imposed break. Three months. Not that big a deal. But I'm nervous about it, of course. My agents don't know this yet. They're going to read it right here. I'm just going to write my own music and kind of get in tune with myself again because I have a tendency to get lost in all of this. And then after that, I don't know.

"Do I want to write a musical? No. I like to do musicals. I love the new young composers, like Andrew Lippa. I haven't worked with any of those guys yet, because I've been working so much. But I will. My own stuff is more introspective. It's very much rock 'n' roll, Bonnie Raitt mixed with Tori Amos. There's definitely a dichotomy to me, that I sometimes don't even understand myself. I haven't performed any of it yet in public. People who are close to my heart have heard it. Maybe I can make an album."

"I'm really nervous about this break," Ms. Benanti reiterated, recapping her bottle of water and preparing to return to rehearsal. "I'm scared -- out of sight, out of mind. But I also figure if I'm meant to do this, then taking three months away is not going to kill it. For the first time in my life, though, since the age of 4, I don't have a plan."

Photos: Laura Benanti in the musical "Time and Again" at the Manhattan Theater Club. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 5); Donna Murphy, left, and Laura Benanti in the Encores! concert production of the musical "Wonderful Town" last May.; Laura Benanti as Maria and Richard Chamberlain as Captain von Trapp in 1999 in a Broadway revival of "The Sound of Music." (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 26)