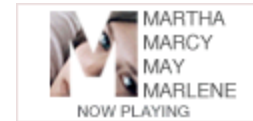


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THEATER

THEATER; An Ample Offer of Help, With Strings Attached

By BARRY SINGER

IS there a market for a musical about a homely young woman who has plastic surgery and then takes eager revenge on the people who rejected her? Or a show about a Jewish stenographer and a black playwright in early 1950's New York who want to find their part of the American dream? What about a solo musical starring a 1999 Tony Award winner, Kristen Chenoweth, possibly one of the few musical comedy performers today who could carry it off?

Musical Theater Works, a nonprofit New York organization dedicated to the development of new American musicals, believes that audiences are hungry for new musical ideas and the three projects described are all part of a brand-new program this season.

The idea began when Lonny Price, the artistic director of Musical Theater Works, and Daisy Prince, a director, decided that the organization would try to help young composers and lyricists by giving them grants and a home away from home in which to work. What Mr. Price calls "12 of the country's most talented musical theater writers" have been chosen this first season. Should marketable musicals result, the organization will also help produce them. Each recipient will receive \$20,000, as well as health insurance for up to three years, while their new musicals are being developed at Musical Theater Works' space on Lafayette Street opposite the Joseph Papp Public Theater.

The composers and lyricists are: Jason Robert Brown ("Parade"); John Buchino (a songwriter); Kirsten Childs ("The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin"); Zina Goldrich and Marcy Heisler (a composer and lyricist, respectively, who have worked together in cabaret); Ricky Ian Gordon ("Dream True"); Adam Guettel ("Floyd Collins"); Michael John LaChiusa ("Marie Christine"; "The Wild Party" produced by the Public Theater); Andrew Lippa ("The Wild Party" produced by the Manhattan Theater Club); Glenn Slater (a lyricist); Grant Sturiale ("Olympus on My Mind"), and Jeanine Tesori ("Violet").

Financial support for the program, Mr. Price said, comes from corporations, private donations and from board members of Musical Theater Works itself. A benefit concert is planned for Oct.

16, at which Patti LuPone, Sherie Rene Scott and Audra McDonald, the evening's host, will perform.

The first project in the program, "The Girl Most Likely To," about the homely young woman, is based on a 1973 teleplay by Joan Rivers. The score is by Ms. Goldrich and Ms. Heisler, with a book by Denis Markell and Doug Bernstein. It has had two readings; a workshop will be held in November.

Mr. Gordon is composing a large-scale work entitled "Shimmer," about the stenographer and the playwright, based on a novel of the same name by Sarah Schulman, who will write the book. Michael Korie is the lyricist; Scott Elliott will direct.

The book for Ms. Chenoweth's show will be written by the actress and Dick Scanlon. The director will be Michael Mayer.

Because of its potential role as a producer, Musical Theater Works will have an option on any musicals that emerge. "We would hope to co-produce all of them down the road," Mr. Price said, "in association with either commercial producers or not-for-profit theaters."

For the more established composers in the program, this may present a problem because Musical Theater Works becomes their automatic producing partner once a project is deemed ready for staging. As one of the program's composers, who requested anonymity, put it: "Sure, it's nice to have a home. But they seem to expect us to pay for the house."

Mr. Price disagreed. "This is a very generous offer," he said. "We're giving them access to 13 rehearsal spaces, fax and phones, in-house casting, technical support, legal and dramaturgical advice. If we produce their show, they will be paid an additional sum based on the standard Dramatists Guild contract. I don't know where they could go for a better deal."

Drawing (Nicholas Gaetano)