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Hooray for What?

Collaboration and the Musical Theater

by Barry Singer

"Do they fight?"

"Oh no. They're much too unhappy to fight."

—Noel Coward

As quoted by Alan Jay Lerner, in summing up his collaboration with Frederick Loewe

Collaboration is the very essence of musical theater. Yet history has generally chosen to view the whole business in terms of one profoundly inconsequential question: Which comes first, the music or the words? In fact, the process is as intricate and inter-related as it is little understood,

a product not simply of compatibility, or even solely of creativity, but of labyrinthine choices navigated through expert direction, ruthless negotiation, comparative ingenuity, competitive ego, and sundry financial considerations. Musical theater's collaborative relationships tend to overrun such titles as Director, Composer, Lyricist, Book-writer, Choreographer, Designer—allowing for those transcendent moments when titles blur, duties cross and unexpected magic ensues.

"Do you mean to tell me we're going to have a scene where these tough gamblers will be standing around the stage while a bunch of dancers get up and do a dance?"—George S. Kaufman

To choreographer Michael Kidd, during rehearsals for *Guys and Dolls*

In September 1961, Bob Fosse—already celebrated for his choreographic contributions to the Broadway hits *The Pajama Game* and *Damn*

When it was in Boston, you don't see Effy at the end; it was only the three of them at the end. One of my suggestions, other people were in agreement too, was that Effy has to come back at the end. Michael kept fighting it and said, "But this is real life. She wouldn't come back at the end," And I said, "Michael, do you realize what you're doing? The audience needs that satisfying thing. We need that sense of completion. You're doing the same thing that you did when you were previewing *A Chorus Line*, when you had Cassie not make the chorus line. Everybody kept begging you to have Cassie be in the line, and you kept saying, 'In real life, she wouldn't be in the line.' And now you're doing the same thing with Effy. Why are you punishing the eccentric, the original?" So he stopped and said, "Yeah, you're right. Can you write it for me?"

Michael and I spoke to each other like that—on a very open level. How our relationship worked gorgeously was when we could talk that

way with each other. How it worked disastrously and horribly was when we reached each other on that same level, and Michael went into his cruelty mode. You opened your spirit and your heart and your unconscious to Michael, and he would not only finish your sentence, he would know what was on your mind and when that was working for you, it was wonderful. But then you were also vulnerable to him, when he got in his sadistic, on-coke mode. Michael on coke was horrible. He humiliated, browbeat, gave people horrible little looks.

Michael only had a couple of days in New York before *Dreamgirls* had to get frozen. And—this is the first time I had seen this happen—he absolutely did not want to go into the theater that day. I had called him to see if he had put in the new ending the night before, and he said, "I can't go in." At first, I thought he was play-acting. But he said, "I can't face anything today. I'm exhausted." For the first time, I was able to do what he

always did for other people; I was able to reverse the roles and be the nurturer. I talked him through it and he did go in,

and he put in the ending, and ultimately he was crazy about it.

There was an hysterical standing ovation on the opening night of *Dreamgirls*. We all went to Tavern on the Green, and we were waiting for Michael, he was really the man of the hour, and he came over to me and said, "I have to talk to you. Are you going to be home tonight?" So, I waited up, and he called me. He said, "Well, you know the first thing my father said to me: it's not as good as *A Chorus Line*." And all he was riveted on was that his father didn't give him the approval he wanted.

JG: How soon after that did you go back to work on *An American Woman*?

TS: I forget when we started working on it again. I had come up with some new concepts, which I was praying Michael would go for, which he did, and then we began again. I kept working, and I kept writing and rewriting. When I was finishing the script I said, "Michael, is it possible we could have a reading," because I figured, if we had a reading and Michael heard the laughs that he originally had when he first read my stuff, I could get him to see it afresh.

This was January of 1984. The three of us—Michael, Bobby and I—sat together at 890 and went over each role, and Michael said, "Bring in names of people you think would be right for it." And we were in such agreement on every single name. The choices we made were so good that it turned out that practically everybody who



Yankees—arrived, by invitation, in Philadelphia on an emergency consultation to the choreographically troubled pre-Broadway tryout of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Fosse quickly solved one of the show's more knotty problem numbers, "Coffee Break," then turned his attention to a lilting waltz tune that had thus far resisted all efforts at staging it, "A Secretary Is Not a Toy." Working in secrecy, secluded from composer Frank Loesser, Fosse boldly tossed out Loesser's designated 3/4 time signature for the song, reconfiguring it by squaring its pulse, in his own words, as "a giant soft shoe" instead. This radical shift in meter unlocked the melody for Fosse in movement, yielding a marvelous new ensemble dance sequence. Loesser, when confronted with Fosse's metrically transformed creation, sympathetically rewrote his original lyric: choreographer collaborating with composer at arm's length to create, not merely a new dance, but an entirely new song.

**"You ought to take just as much care in providing your fun as you do your education."
—Joseph Urban**

After accepting Florenz Ziegfeld's invitation to become the Ziegfeld Follies' resident set designer

The celebrated couturier Mainbocher was a theatrical novice when he attended a private audition of Kurt Weill's new *One Touch of Venus* score performed with the show's star, Mary Martin, in a Manhattan apartment. "As Kurt played the introduction to 'That's Him,'" Martin later recalled, "I picked up a chair and carried it over right in front of Mainbocher. I sat on it sideways and sang, 'That's Him' right smack into those eyes."

"I will do your clothes for the show if you promise me one thing," the designer announced when she was through. "Promise me you'll always sing this song that way. Take a chair down to the footlights, sing across the orchestra to the audience as if it were one person."

was chosen for the reading was the right person for the workshop. And Michael did something that's never been done. He said, "I absolutely love the play, and to tell the truth, I don't know if it's a play, if it's a play with incidental music, if it's a play with additional music, or if it's a musical. Give me a few days and let's see what I can come up with." So, in two days, he dummied up a complete musical.

Michael got together with Harold Wheeler who was the musical supervisor and orchestrator for *Dreamgirls*, and they took the script and every place Michael felt there could be a musical number, he would take the dialogue, and make it into little songs. They didn't particularly scan, but sometimes they did, and he'd make a little march out of something, and he'd make a little jazz number out of something, all in two days. So he was directing people doing a march, and he was directing dream sequences, and he was directing nightmares. And it was all coming out of my dialogue, and he would put the dialogue into kind of a pattern and a rhythm based on classical music or little songs that everybody knew and had everybody sing. It was the most remarkable thing. I had no idea that it would be that incredibly put together.



JG: That was how he improvised tunes?

TS: He would take a segment of dialogue, and he would take classical songs...

JG: When you say classical, you mean Mozart or...

TS: He'd take themes from operas that everybody knew. I remember

people marching around, and with the actors there was a mixture of panic and delight. Because it was just thrown together, and yet it was so much fun. The end of the script is very poignant. People were in tears, and everybody was running around saying, "It's a show, it's a show, it's a show, it's a show." Michael had all his design people there: Theoni Aldredge, Tharon Musser, Robin Wagner. They all met in his office, and I came in later, and they said, "Yes, it's a show. It's a musical. It is a musical. And we're going to do it." And then he announced it to the press. And it was done.

This was February of 1984. And then we started the first workshop the following May. It was the most incredible cast: Swoosie Kurtz, Treat Williams, Victor Garber doing four roles, Priscilla Lopez, Fisher Stevens, Kelly Bishop, David Rasche, Danny Herman was the associate choreographer. I was walking on air. I'd been working for this moment all my life. And the fact that Michael loved *Scandal* and wanted to do it and that it was going to be his next musical—I felt we'd jumped all the

hurdles, and the rest was going to be smooth.

Michael was absolutely raring to go. He got permission from Equity to do four workshops. And it wasn't workshop one, two, three, four; it was workshop one, one A, two, two A. He divided it up as book and then dance, book and then music, book and then dance—that way everybody would get a little bit of time off. Michael got no time off. People couldn't understand how he kept going. We worked straight through from May to December. Non-stop.

Michael was unwaveringly confident that the show was going to be a big success. He kept the workshops under wraps, very private, but word of mouth kept getting out that it was a fantastic show. He was able to achieve a marvelous balance between the comedy, the sexiness and the innocence. The sexuality was very open and explicit but always in good taste.

JG: Did it end one day because of Michael's state of health?

TS: It was supposed to open on Broadway April 11, 1985. Nobody realized the show had gone way over budget; in December 1984, at the end of the last workshop, Michael suddenly told everybody he was going to open it off-Broadway, and then move it uptown. A lot of people were

shocked because they felt they couldn't afford it. One designer said to him, "Michael, I owe a huge amount of taxes, and I



Martin sang "That's Him" at least five hundred times during the 1943-1944 run of *One Touch of Venus* on Broadway, each time precisely as her costumer had choreographed it.

Scenic designer Boris Aronson's intricate apartment set of glass and chrome for the musical *Company* actually determined a key musical interval in composer Stephen Sondheim's opening number for that show. "I wanted to pick a moment when the elevator would work," director Hal Prince has since explained, "There was a workable elevator on the stage. That's a moment you don't want to throw away." Prince staged his number to the point where he pictured the elevator's entrance, then called Aronson. "How long do you think it will take somebody to get from the top level to the floor?" "About fifteen seconds," Aronson replied. Seeking that window for his cast's descent, Prince asked Sondheim for one fifteen second sustained note on the word "love" in the show's title song "Company." The note, held for Boris Aronson's set, is to this day

the dramatic apex of both song and scene.

"Everybody in show business listens to anybody." —Herbie To Mamma Rose (in Arthur Laurents's book for *Gypsy*)

Uncredited outside collaboration often is as intrinsic to the creation of musical theater as any credited contribution. In the final scene of his 1940 libretto for *Pal Joey*, librettist John O'Hara had his Vera Simpson character—"bewitched no more"—ordering Joey out of her house without a coat, shifting sympathy to Joey-the-heel, in the eyes of *New York Times*' critic Brooks Atkinson who found the show's amorality offensive. Twelve years later, reviving *Pal Joey* for what would prove to be its critical and commercial redemption, Jule Styne, functioning this time as producer, recalled Atkinson's overcoat cavil and, in the true spirit of collaboration, cut the scene. Atkinson's review, the second time around, was a rave.

didn't take another job, because you told me not to. I won't have the money to pay my taxes now that we're not opening on Broadway." And Michael said, "Betrayal, betrayal, that's all I have." He acted horribly. Michael felt that he didn't have the allegiance of people, that he should have the allegiance. He would say to people, "I made you." He actually said to one of the designers, "I made you, I can break you." But this was when he was most coked.

And then there came the horrible, nightmare thing. One day in January 1985, he suddenly stopped the show, cancelled it. Everybody was in a state of shock. Nobody knew what happened. He told people that he couldn't go on with the show—because of me. He said I'd made all these demands in my contract like approval over the cast, the sets and the costumes. Well, that made no sense because those approvals have always been part of the standard Dramatists Guild contract. Nobody knew what to think. Soon people started to realize that Michael wouldn't stop the show over my contract, but he refused to talk anymore about it, and the next day flew to the Caribbean and was unreachable. I was devastated. It was, I think, in my life, the worst thing that had ever happened. And I have high hopes that it will remain the worst thing that has ever happened.



Review: "The great irony of Michael Bennett's career was his abandonment of an almost fully staged musical called *Scandal* in 1985....Like the handful of others who saw it, I knew it would have been the best thing he'd ever done."

JG: When did you find out about Michael's health?

TS: We didn't know until much later, until right before he died, that Michael had found out in the fourth workshop that he was HIV positive. He didn't tell anybody. He didn't even tell his secretary. I've talked to Michael's best, best, trusted assistant; Michael would not even tell him anything about it. He told nobody. Later on, right before died, he called a few of us who were connected with the show and told us what had happened. He said, if it was anything except a show about sex, a show about experimentation, but how could I direct a show about sex, dying of AIDS, who would want to see it?

Armistead Maupin said something really terrific in *TV Guide* about the seventies. He said there's "...a growing nostalgia for a time when status wasn't everything and sex wasn't potentially

Barbara Gelb had been following *Scandal* for a *Times* piece she was working on, and after Michael died, she wrote in *The New York Times Book*

fatal." And that's what I've been starting to think about *Scandal*.

JG: Yes. That's what struck me so much—that it was so blissful.

TS: Do you think that its time has come again?

JG: It's got to be set in a different way. It's got to be a memory piece. Your version of what Armistead Maupin said has to open the show. We have to be aware of the double voice—the then and the now. It has to say, I'm thinking of a time.

TS: A nostalgia for a time.

JG: As if it's in such a distant past that we can't even remember it. This needs: "once upon a time." Once upon a time there was a kingdom called the World, and there was a princess in it named Claudia. Now, this princess lived in a time that's almost impossible to imagine. A fantasy time.

TS: This is an unthinkable time; it's absolutely unthinkable that there was ever a world like this—when we were able to try whatever we wanted and to feel free about it.

JG: Maybe we are talking about another planet.

TS: Maybe she doesn't even come from planet earth. Maybe she doesn't even come from New York.

JG: But where she comes from isn't important. What's important is...

TS: Yes. Where she goes. ♦