

“Ye Shall Live in Song and Story”

– W.S. Gilbert, *The Pirates of Penzance*

OSF and other regional companies find that integrating musicals into their seasons makes sense artistically as well as financially.

By Mark Dundas Wood

In 2011, OSF will present its third musical production in as many seasons: Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1879 comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*. It follows *She Loves Me* in 2010 and *The Music Man* in 2009, both of which were big hits.

Three of something makes a trend, and some might view this trend as a scandalous departure for what has traditionally been a language-based theatre. But Bill Rauch, who directed *Music Man* and will direct *Pirates*, contends that OSF has solid artistic reasons for mounting musicals. Doing so was a huge risk, he says.

“Our audience is full of Shakespeare lovers. Would they turn their noses up at a musical? That was a real issue for us.”

Rauch says that musical theatre is an essential part of the body of dramatic literature. “There’s a kind of formal connection between musicals and Shakespeare’s plays. Both use heightened language—with characters communicating through verse or song at crucial moments of emotion. Both involve a presentational relationship between actor and audience in which the former soliloquizes or sings inner thoughts for the latter. And both have a robustness and vigor in their storytelling.”

As far as *Pirates* goes, Rauch said in a company meeting, “It’s wildly appropriate for us as a language-based theatre because it’s so literate. It’s so much about clever use of language. Even the subtitle: *The Slave of Duty*, the idea that ‘my word is all I have,’ is taken to completely comical, farcical extremes.”

OSF’s growing success incorporating musical theatre into its seasons has caused theatre directors nationwide to express a similar interest to Rauch, he says. As with Shakespeare, these artists are attracted to, as he puts it, “the scale, the theatricality and the extroverted emotional life that musicals require.”

Around the country, musicals are increasingly becoming not just an occasional fling but an established part of a regional theatre’s lineup. The reasons range from musicals being a smart choice in fragile economic times to the popularity of musical films to the availability of money to create musicals to a burgeoning new young audience rediscovering the art form.

A divided reputation

It wasn’t always the case. The musical, though always popular, has been a polarizing genre since at least the 1960s. Some people embrace it without reservation, taping and archiving every Tony Awards ceremony. On the other end of the spectrum are the musical-theatre haters, who deride the musical as frothy, sentimental and uncool.

Hair notwithstanding, 1960s rockers largely ignored the potential for staged musical storytelling. A generation learned to scoff at “show tunes”—forgetting that the Beatles once covered “Till There Was You” from *The Music Man*. Decades passed, and eyes kept rolling. But in the last eight to ten years, the musical has found its full voice again—and now it sometimes even sings rock or country or R&B.

She Loves Me (2010): (left to right) Mr. Kodaly (Michael Elich), Georg (Mark Bedard) and Mr. Sipos (Michael J. Hume) look over a new product in the parfumerie as Miss Ritter (Miriam A. Laube) looks on.



So says Dana Harrel, associate producer at California's La Jolla Playhouse, the regional theatre known for developing such shows as *Jersey Boys* and this year's Tony-winning *Memphis*. Harrel credits the 2002 Oscar-winning film version of John Kander and Fred Ebb's *Chicago* with fanning interest in musicals both on film and stage. For the first time in decades, a live-action film musical had found both critical and popular acclaim. The sardonic *Chicago*—released a year after a national tragedy that left people looking for something to sing and dance about—prompted the creation of other musical films. Some succeeded (*Mamma Mia*, *Hairspray*, *Dreamgirls*). Some faltered (*The Phantom of the Opera*, *Nine*).

The ones that became the biggest cultural phenomena were first viewed not in cinemas but on TV's Disney Channel. These were the *High School Musical* films.

The surprisingly popular Disney vehicles were followed by the astonishingly popular FOX television series *Glee*. And, lo, a new generation had fallen in love with the idea of song and dance. Kids began asking their parents to see stage musicals, too.

"Thank God for *High School Musical*," says Harrel, "because now every 16-year-old kid wants to do a musical. . . . Thank God for [producer] David Stone and *Wicked*. Every girl who's now about 18 saw *Wicked* when she was 12 years old and fell in love with Idina Menzel [on the cast album]."

According to Harrel, musicals are now a must for regional theatres—especially those with facilities seating 800 or more. "Remember how theatres used to do *A Christmas Carol*, and it would pay for the rest of their season? Now they do a big musical, and it pays for the rest of their season."

Part of the strategy, Harrel says, is to entice customers back to see something else in the season lineup. "When they have them in the door, they say, 'Hey, by any chance, do you want to see a little Ibsen?'"

Bustin' out all over

OSF has, says Rauch, made "occasional forays" into the musical theatre world throughout its history, stretching back as far as Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1974. Other examples include *The Threepenny Opera* (1986), *Enter the Guardsman* (2001) and the world premiere of *Tracy's Tiger* (2007). But some of these one-off efforts could be classified as "chamber musicals." With *The Music Man*, Rauch was planning something bigger and more enduring. He hoped that a rousing, full-throttle entry in the American musical-theatre canon would be a step toward a more consistent commitment to the genre.

Long before Rauch's move to make musicals an essential ingredient of the OSF season, theatres across the continent were staging them regularly. The Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada, for instance, has included an annual musical or operetta since the late 1970s.

At Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., musicals were produced fairly frequently in past decades. But when current artistic director Molly Smith took over in 1998, they became a seasonal staple. Although she had first become interested in theatre because of musicals, Smith for a time had turned her back on the form. She didn't see musicals as "serious theatre." Eventually, she came to understand that she could approach certain subject matter in musicals that would prove unpalatable to audiences in "straight" plays.

"*South Pacific* is probably one of the most sophisticated [works] about race and relationship to a society," she explains. "The audience begins tapping their feet as they're listening to the music, and the information goes to the core of their being. So that's why I moved into directing musicals—an ability to talk to the audience in a very deep way. It all happens with the music."

The Utah Shakespearean Festival began regularly including musicals in its lineup a few seasons after building the 769-seat Randall L. Jones Theatre in 1989.



The Music Man (2009): The deeper theme of a town's transformation—expressed here in the Ensemble's joyous dancing—is one reason why director Bill Rauch feels that this musical is an important work in the canon of American plays.

Executive Director R. Scott Phillips acknowledges that, indeed, the move was meant to attract new audiences. USF started off with a small-scale show in 1995: once again, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The show was a smash, and after a few cautious years, USF began mounting more ambitious titles: *Damn Yankees*, *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*.

"All the time, our tech staff was saying, 'Guys, this is a huge musical,'" recalls Phillips. "And if that was the only thing we were doing, it would be one thing. But with repertory theatre—where you're doing a 2:00 p.m. matinee of something and then turning around at 8:00 and doing another show in the same facility—you have to conceive and construct the scenery in an entirely different way. So it has posed challenges, but I think it is part of our DNA."

Musicals are certainly expensive to produce, requiring extra staffing—musicians, choreographer, musical director. Despite the popularity of the form, some theatres have decided to forgo them altogether until the economic climate improves.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey has sporadically mounted smaller,

classically oriented musicals over the years, but their most recent effort was *Illyria*, Peter Mills and Cara Reichel's musicalization of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, back in 2004. "It's disappointing," says Artistic Director Bonnie Monte. "There are a number of musicals I'm quite anxious to do."

Certainly, the musically rich and witty *Illyria* was no failure. In fact, it was so popular that STNJ was able to secure a grant to record a cast album. "We knew that we probably would revive it sometime within the next decade, so we felt that it would be a fairly evergreen kind of gift shop item," says Monte. The CD was also used to introduce other theatres to *Illyria*. "I would do that again if we had a piece with similar aspirations," she says.

About as far as they can go

Theatres like STNJ (which looks specifically to the "classic canon" of literature for its inspiration) by nature must steer clear of certain lucrative, sure-fire musicals like *Damn Yankees* and *Annie*.

Similarly, companies with an avant-garde bent have their own take on the genre. Consider the Undermain Theatre

in Dallas. The Undermain customarily produces works by playwrights associated with New York City's downtown experimental theatres. Because of its close proximity to a vibrant club-music scene, the theatre naturally began including live musicians in some productions, starting in the late 1980s.

"We are very interested in the musical medium, in particular opera and rock opera as a means of dramatic expression," says Executive Producer Bruce DuBose. Undermain's musicals have been big draws: *Waiting for a Train* and *Greendale* both saw encore stagings, and *Greendale* also traveled to the New York Ice Factory Festival.

The Hypocrites in Chicago is the kind of company for which the term "cutting edge" might have been coined. (The group is perhaps best known for director David Cromer's 2008 poignant reinvention of *Our Town*, which moved to New York to critical acclaim and a lengthy Off-Broadway run.)

After about 10 years of operation, the company staged its first musical, *The Threepenny Opera*, in 2008. They offered a more mainstream Broadway title, *Cabaret* in 2010.



"During our first couple of years," says founder and Artistic Director Sean Graney, "the big joke was that we were going to do *Oklahoma!* You know—pretentious, young, artsy upstarts doing *Oklahoma!* But on the inside, I was really hoping people would get behind the idea. I love *Oklahoma!* Like really. Like non-ironically. I think it's almost perfect."

Graney hopes *The Hypocrites* will now stage at least one musical each season. He believes audiences no longer draw firm aesthetic distinctions between musicals and nonmusicals. "I do think some theatre makers still apply the strict division," he adds. "I personally think that all plays should have music, and all musicals should have a deep human story. So to me, other than [differing] production costs and the number of dance numbers, it's the same, artistically."

Not the same old song and dance

If theatres up the ante when they begin producing musicals, they raise the stakes further when they begin developing and producing original musicals. This happens frequently. The 2005 Tony-winning *The Light in the Piazza*, for example, was developed at Seattle's Intiman Theatre and Chicago's Goodman

Theatre. Arena Stage mounted *Next to Normal* in the 2008–09 season, between the show's Off-Broadway and Broadway runs. It went on to win the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

According to Harrel, the La Jolla Playhouse has commissioned 32 new works over the years, many of which have been musicals. Several Playhouse shows have landed on Broadway, including *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Jersey Boys* and *Memphis*.

Producers increasingly offer "enhancement money" to not-for-profit theatres like La Jolla for a developmental production of a property believed to have Broadway potential. This arrangement can result in royalty payments if a show takes off in New York. But, contrary to customary thinking, says Harrel, only one or two of the shows that have transferred to Broadway have brought La Jolla significant royalty monies.

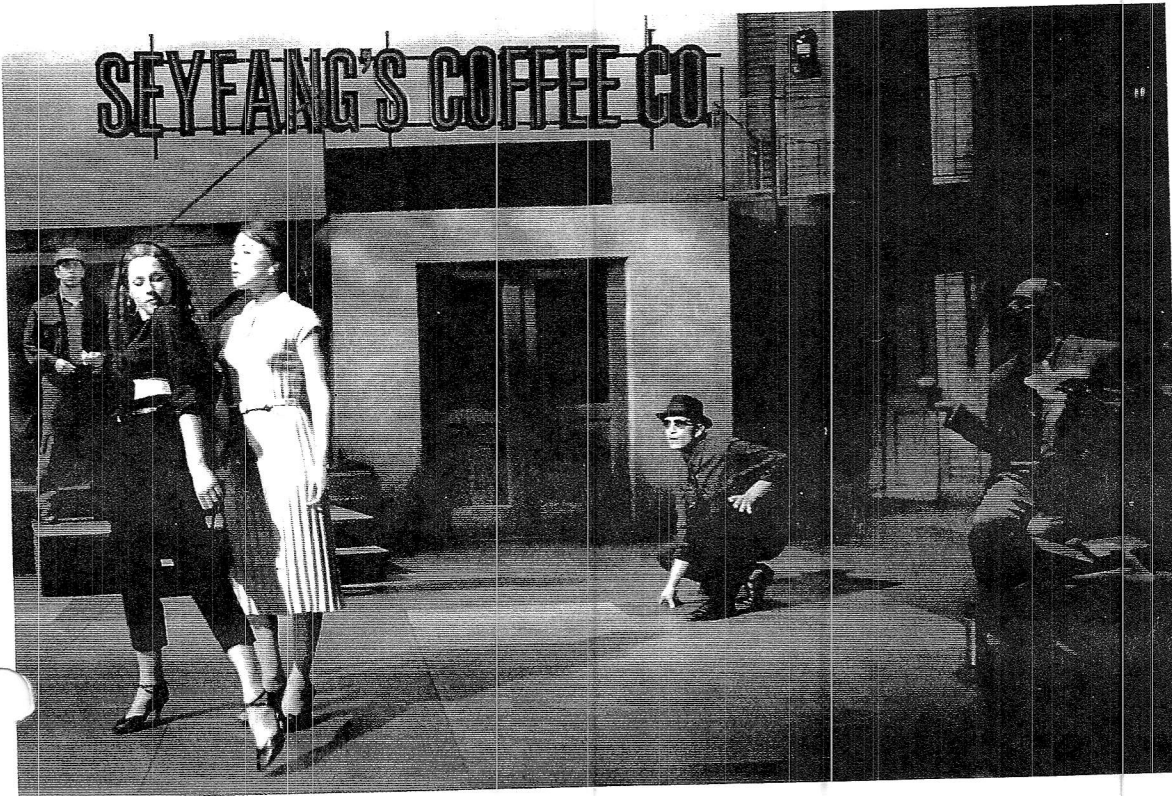
So funding must come from alternative sources. Oddly, Harrel notes, although some donors have provided funding specifically for development of new works at La Jolla, none have earmarked money specifically for new musicals.

That's not the case at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia, which has received generous funding from the Shen Family Foundation for its American Musical Voices Project and two companion programs. (Ted and Mary Jo Shen have also supported new works at other theatres via their Musical Theater Composers Initiative.)

Signature's Artistic Director Eric D. Schaeffer met the Shens at the Stephen Sondheim Celebration in 2002 at Washington's Kennedy Center, where Schaeffer was directing *Passion* and the Shens were sponsors. Schaeffer approached the couple about funding for a construction project, but they chose instead to support the development of innovative musicals that build on the Sondheim tradition and push the boundaries of the form.

"We've given more than three-quarters of a million dollars to writers to write musical theatre," says Schaeffer, "which hasn't happened anywhere else in the country. And the great thing is, we say, 'Write whatever you want.' Restrictions? There are none."

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Tracy's Tiger (2007): This OSF world premiere, a jazzy adaptation of a William Saroyan novella, falls more into the category of a chamber musical than the full-bore musicals that would follow. (left to right) Juan Rivera LeBron, Nell Geisslinger, Laura Morache, René Millán and Brad Whitmore.

Recently, OSF similarly benefited from the largesse of a donor for the development of new musicals.

The Los Angeles-based Edgerton Foundation provided a \$200,000 grant for the commission of five shows over a four-year period. The first awards were bestowed on two artists of national import: rock singer Stew (Broadway's *Passing Strange*) and Michael Friedman (whose "emo" musical, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, is moving to Broadway soon after an extended run at New York's Public Theater).

Rauch says the move toward the production of new musicals makes sense in light of the Festival's increased concentration on original scripts. "Musicals can cut across lots of different programs in which we're developing new works," he notes. Friedman, for instance, is a trained historian whose sensibility is a natural fit with OSF's *American Revolutions* cycle of original plays based on U.S. history.

Play on

Whatever the subject matter, whatever the musical genre, it seems that OSF and other American regional theatres will be making music throughout the foreseeable future. But, as Rauch stresses, OSF remains a "language-based" theatre that relies on performers who are, first and foremost, actors.

In other words, the play will remain the thing, even when the lines are sung rather than spoken.

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