

Contemporary Music Theater: Louder Than Words



Robert Edwin

Michael Philip O'Brien is on a mission: "To explore contemporary musical theatre, spanning all spectrums of popular music and culture, by casting young local professionals to set the standard for cutting edge musical theatre in Philadelphia."

As Artistic Director for the fledgling 11th Hour Theatre Company, Michael wants to join, if not lead, a growing theatrical bandwagon by producing contemporary musicals that speak to the post modern theatergoer rather than mounting yet another production from the popular, profitable, but certainly not current, Rodgers and Hammerstein catalogue of shows.

O'Brien's new company put its quoted mission statement into action at its May 2004 inaugural benefit concert entitled, "Louder Than Words." They featured songs from the Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, and way-off Broadway shows, *Hedwig*

& *the Angry Itch*, *Aida*, *Rent*, *Tommy*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Hair*, *Mama Mia*, *Batboy*, *Hairspray*, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, *Tick, Tick, Boom*, *The Full Monty*, and *Wicked*.

For singing teachers whose studios include professional and preprofessional music theater singers, the aforementioned shows should be familiar. For singing teachers new to the world of music theater pedagogy and repertoire, the aforementioned shows cannot be ignored since they represent the thirty or more years that rock n' roll in its many forms has been influencing the modern musical.

11th Hour Theatre Company director, Megan Nicole O'Brien, reflected on that musical and cultural influence in her program notes: "After many weeks of hard work, I was still having a difficult time naming our production. I kept being drawn back to the song list. I wanted to pick a title that would embody the meaning of our show.

"The title, *Louder Than Words* (from the musical, *Tick, Tick, Boom*) jumped out at me. I realized that that is exactly what our show is about; actions speaking louder than words. Whether these songs express love, rebellion, hope, desire, determination, or courage, they all demonstrate the effect people's choices have upon their lives. These effects, in turn, determine what benefits they reap or consequences they suffer."

Each generation personalizes its language and music to express how it sees, hears, and feels life. Each generation tries to develop a popular culture that can claim, "This is *our* spin on reality," and by so doing, says to

previous generations, "We'll use your language, your music, your popular culture as a means to find and make our own statement. Until that time, however, we can't call what you've created, ours."

Broadway has recognized this generational evolution. Baby Boomers, those people born post World War II through the early 1950s, are the first generation to be raised primarily on rock n' roll. Now in their fifties with significant disposable income, Baby Boomers want to hear *their* music wherever they go. Broadway, wanting a piece of that disposable income, has responded. Billy Joel's *Movin' Out*, Elton John's *Aida*, Abba's *Mama Mia*, and Menken's *Little Shop of Horrors*, are but a few of the more recent Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) additions to Broadway's "Great White Way."

Theatrical contributions from later generations include Larson's *Rent*, Brown's *Songs for a New World*, and Lippa's *Wild Party*. As time goes by, young composers, lyricists, and librettists waiting in the wings will have their opportunity to speak for their generations. Music theater knows it is simply good business to keep abreast of society's musical tastes.

Unfortunately, Broadway seems to be more adaptable to musical change than the greater voice teaching community. In spite of the theater world's obvious and overwhelming shift to pop, rock, and R & B-based music, the majority of college and university music theater voice departments continue to be heavily populated with current and former classical opera singers who know little if anything

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about nonclassical voice pedagogy and repertoire.

Their mantra is, "If you learn to sing classically, you can sing anything," which is equivalent to a tennis instructor saying, "If you learn to play tennis, you can play any sport." Frankly, the situation could get worse. As Broadway continues to distance itself from classical or "legit" singing styles, the classically trained singer will have fewer venues in which to sing and will have even more difficulty adapting to the ever-changing vocal demands of the roles, especially in light of the current emphasis on high belt and belt/mix singing.

How then do we solve the problem? One way would be to implore the entire music theater community to return to the "good old days" of legitimate singing in unamplified houses with music and lyrics of a bygone era. One would also need to tell the Baby Boomers and subsequent generations that their popular music

is inferior and not worthy of performance.

Another way would be for college and university voice pedagogy courses to include Contemporary Commercial Music voice technique and repertoire in the syllabus. Initially, many would have to go outside their departments to find experienced and qualified instructors in that area. After a short period of time, however, colleges and universities would have a substantial talent pool of well trained music theater voice pedagogues to hire. These qualified teachers would, in turn, train the music theater students in all of the Broadway vocal styles, including classical. Problem solved.

To their credit, more and more institutions of higher learning are attempting to address this "pedagogy and repertoire gap" through tenure-track and adjunct hirings, NATS workshops and seminars, and master teacher-in-residence programs. For the sake of the artistic, financial,


and vocal health of contemporary music theater singers, change can't come soon enough. The 11th Hour Theatre Company did indeed speak "louder than words" at their benefit concert. Will we, the voice teaching community, listen?

Robert Edwin, baritone, has sung Bach cantatas in cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeehouses. He has performed in New York City's Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, toured throughout the USA and abroad, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and published as an ASCAP lyricist and composer.

His diverse performing career is paralleled by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on nonclassical and child voice pedagogy, he practices what he preaches at his private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. He serves on the Applied Music Staff at NJ's Camden County College, and is a frequent faculty member of The Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice. Past positions include Adjunct Professor of Music at the University of Michigan, adjunct music faculty at Burlington County College, and Contributing Editor for the choral teacher's magazine, VocalEase. A member of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

In 1985, Robert Edwin's column, "The Bach to Rock Connection" became the first feature in the NATS Journal of Singing dedicated to nonclassical pedagogy. He has also served NATS as NJ Chapter President, and as a presenter/clinician at national conventions, summer workshops, and regional and chapter events. His present NATS responsibilities include national Secretary/Treasurer, as well as Associate Editor of the Journal of Singing shepherding the new column, "Popular Song and Music Theater."

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