

FEATURES

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PAGE 13

A revival of 'Dreamgirls' is tapping musical-mad South Korea for lower production costs and financing

BY **CHOE SANG-HUN**
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SEOUL



Several months ago, when John F. Breglio told fellow New York producers that he was not only remaking *Dreamgirls*, the 1981 Broadway hit musical based loosely on the career of the Supremes, but that he was also going to South Korea to do it, they were puzzled, to say the least.

"Then they really laugh," he said, when he told them "that it's in Korean with Korean actors."

Breglio, the executor of the estate of Michael Bennett (who directed and choreographed *Dreamgirls* and *A Chorus Line*, among others), calls his venture an experiment. His US\$6.7 million *Dreamgirls* opened to a packed theater here Feb. 27 and has drawn good reviews.

What Breglio's company, Vienna Waits Productions, is doing with its South Korean partner, Shin Chun-soo, the president of the OD Musical Co in Seoul, is unusual for US theater producers, some of whom said they were skeptical that elements of a Korean production would transfer smoothly to an American stage. Nevertheless, Breglio plans to open the show, with a new American cast, at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in November.

Shin, representative of South Korea's new, voracious appetite for musical theater, bankrolled the production: royalties for American artists, a local cast, costumes and a US\$1.5 million set.

The financial incentives for Breglio to go to South Korea were significant, coming as many Broadway producers are struggling to cover production costs. The fact that the set was made and financed here, and will be transferred to the US for the run there, is a big savings for the American producers.

The South Korean side is also covering the lion's share of the entire tryout costs: wages and expenses for the 20-member American creative staff during its stay here (which ran from a month to 10 weeks), the Americans' lodgings and meals, the costs of choreography and stage and costume designs (though the costumes will be remade for American actresses). By the time *Dreamgirls* reaches the Apollo, Breglio said, he will need to have raised only about US\$5 million, half of what it usually costs to put on a show in the US.

"This model is more important than ever because there is a real threat right now in the United States to getting these shows done," he said in an interview here. "Even without the crisis, Broadway has gone very expensive."

For South Koreans, though, the arrangement is a matter of pleasure and cultural explorations. Many here are not especially familiar with African-American heritage. But the universal themes of the story — three young women struggling to escape men's exploitation and make it on their own in show business, the power of sisterhood and redemption — made the 2006 Hollywood movie adaptation hugely successful in South Korea, a country with a new generation of assertive women moving from the margins of society to the center.

South Korea is a natural place for American producers to look: the country has 180 musicals already running or scheduled to go onstage in the coming weeks. Ticket sales for musicals grew 25 percent last year, according to Interpark, the country's largest online ticket seller. *Dreamgirls* was leading the musical rankings this week.

Among the cultural differences the

producers had to overcome were the hesitancy and even embarrassment that Korean actresses feel about expressing strong emotions.

"The women are not as confrontational as they are in the United States," Longbottom said. "Pointing your finger at someone's face and chasing them around the stage and yelling at them was something that didn't come naturally to this group of people."

Kim So-hyang, who played Lorrell Robinson, one of the three singers, said she initially felt "resistant" to the director's demand for "what we Koreans considered overdoing it and exaggerated acting."

Many Korean actresses hope to perform on Broadway one day. Like the women of *Dreamgirls*, who rose from the fringe to stardom, Korean musical performers have only recently begun enjoying a national following after years of being dismissed as crude imitators of a foreign art form.

Hong Ji-min, who plays Effie White, the show's full-figured, gospel-voiced lead singer, said she struggled to render the deep vocal flavor of the character.

But working with the composer, Henry Krieger, whom the actresses called Grandpa, was their own dream come true.

"We cry after each show," Hong said. "This has a story that feels so close to our heart. It's about the show business. It's about having a dream."

Left: John Breglio, executor of the estate of *Dreamgirls* creator Michael Bennett, with Shin Chun-soo, head of South Korea's OD Musical Company, during an interview at Charlotte Theater in Seoul.

Below: *Dreamgirls* has opened to rave reviews in Seoul. The musical will have an American cast when it goes to the US.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE AND AP

[THE WEEKENDER]

Falling in love with Norman

BY **DIANE BAKER**
STAFF REPORTER

I left the National Theater on Friday night deeply impressed by the work of four men I had never heard of until a few weeks ago: Norman McLaren, Michel Lemieux, Victor Pilon and Peter Trosztmer.

Norman (A Tribute to Norman McLaren) centers on the work of Scottish-Canadian animation pioneer and two-time Oscar winner Norman McLaren, who died 12 years ago but was creating films until the very end. What a creative life it was. McLaren could make a single line dance, spin and captivate, to say nothing of squares, spheres, rhomboids, hens, chairs, men and scratches. The show utilizes a small black-box set, holographic projections of people and objects, film clips and one live performer — dancer Trosztmer.

Norman, staged in Taipei as part of the Taiwan International Festival, is a technical tour-de-force that never loses sight of the humanity at the heart of McLaren's work. The show is also proof of the adage: Everything old is new again. Grainy filmstrips sizzled and popped with a rhythm that made you tap your feet. Hip-hop DJs who thought they created something new with scratching records owe a big debt to McLaren, who was scratching film negatives decades ago to make a film that would create its own score when run through a projector.

Lemieux, Pilon, Trosztmer and choreographer Thea Patterson created a 100-minute show that weaves biographical information, film clips, music and movement together seamlessly. Trosztmer's character is working on a biography of the animator and, through Lemieux and Pilon's innovative technology, interviews several of McLaren's former colleagues at the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada.

But the fun really begins when Trosztmer get the key to the NFB's film vault. When the vault door opens a wave of animated creatures knock Trosztmer over or plow right through him: snakes, squiggles, chickens, a parade of cats, and pith-helmeted soldiers. Trosztmer, who was on stage for all but about 10 minutes of the show, interacts and dances with these creations so realistically that you believe he is waltzing with green glowing spheres and being squeezed by multiplying vertical lines.

While the orchestra level of the National Theater wasn't as packed for *Norman* as it has been for some of the other shows Taiwan International Festival, the upper levels appeared to have scores of high school and college students who were buzzing as they left for home. One can only hope that more than a few of them have been inspired to challenge artistic barriers the way McLaren did and, Lemieux, Pilon and Trosztmer are doing now.

Over at the Novel Hall on Saturday, the show was smaller and quieter than *Norman*, but *Vipashayana* (觀・自在) by Jade & Artists Dance Troupe (肢體音符舞團), was no less well-crafted. As with *Norman*, it was the images that choreographer Jade Hua (華碧玉) created, rather than particular movements, that I remembered most.

The dancers showed a uniformity of technique and strength that is not often seen in Taiwan's smaller dance companies.

The show began with the 10 women, clad in workout clothes, seated or standing about the front of the stage. One dancer holds a white balloon, which she hands to an audience member. The other dancers move through the auditorium, apparently searching for something or someone, before leaving the original balloon holder alone with her balloon. When the stage curtain finally parts, there is one woman trapped inside a giant plastic ball, while the others move around small cityscapes made of clear plastic cubes. The movements of the woman in the ball become more frantic until she is repeatedly throwing herself at the sides and collapsing onto the floor.

Part two, "State of Confusion," begins with black stage curtain being raised about a meter, revealing a wall of bamboo rods and the feet and legs of the dancers as they stamp about flamenco style. From the flamenco, the dancers begin to run and throw themselves onto their backs to glide across the floor. I don't remember the transition, but I remember the gliding.

Part three, "Self Realization" saw the company's 10 dancers clad in white pants and tops, move through a series of slow tai chi, Buddhist meditation- and yoga-inspired poses that at one point had most of them in prolong shoulder-stand poses, until just one was left, illuminated from below, a vision of purity.

BroadwayoutsourcetoSeoul



PLANET POP



The civil trial against South Korean pop star and actor **Rain** is scheduled to begin tomorrow in US District Court.

Rain — whose real name is Jung Ji-hoon — and his producers are being sued over the performer's abrupt cancellation of a June 2007 concert in Honolulu. Jury selection is scheduled to begin

tomorrow and Rain could be called to testify as early as Wednesday.

Click Entertainment Inc alleges in the suit that Rain and his producers defrauded it of more than US\$500,000 paid in licensing fees. Also, it is seeking additional damages for the cost of staging the event.

The concert was canceled just days before the scheduled June 15, 2007, performance, disappointing many fans who paid as much as US\$300 for a ticket and flew from as far as away as Japan and South Korea. It was the first stop on the "Rain's Coming" US tour.

Performances in San Francisco, Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles were also canceled. The Los Angeles show was canceled less than two hours before show time.

Concert organizers at the time said they called off the performances because of a copyright challenge from record company Rain Corp. A court later dismissed the case.

Michael Jackson is feeling the love in London.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Michael Jackson, on the other hand, is certainly making it rain.

The Gloved One's run of 50 comeback concerts in London starting on July 8 sold out around five hours after tickets went on sale, the promoters said on Friday.

The 50-year-old announced last week that he would return to the stage 12 years after his last series of concerts, although the original commitment was to 10 gigs at London's O2 Arena.

That has now expanded to 50, ending on Feb. 24, 2010.

Hundreds of thousands of tickets went on sale to registered fans earlier in the week, and ahead of Friday's general release hundreds of people queued at the O2 Arena to ensure they made it to the eagerly awaited shows. Many had camped out overnight.

Also on Friday came news that an arrest warrant had been issued for **Lindsay Lohan**. The US\$50,000 warrant issued by the Beverly Hills Superior Court stems from her 2007 conviction for drunken driving, police said.

The 22-year-old *Mean Girls*



Robert Pattinson wasn't too comfortable doing "naked stuff" with a male actor.

PHOTO: AP

star was arrested in May 2007 after crashing her Mercedes in Beverly Hills. She was arrested again last July after the mother of her former personal assistant reported that her car was being chased by a sport utility vehicle. Police said Lohan was at the wheel of the SUV and she was arrested in Santa Monica.

In connection with those cases, Lohan pleaded guilty to two counts of being under the influence of cocaine, and no contest to two counts of driving with a blood-alcohol level above 0.08 percent and one count of reckless driving.

A cool US\$28 million dollars could get you living right next door to the Playboy Mansion, known for *Playboy* sex empire founder **Hugh Hefner's** extravagant parties.

Hefner has put his family home up for sale, the *Los Angeles Times* has reported.

The two-story, 700m² English manor-style residence was built in 1929 and has five bedrooms, seven bathrooms, a library and commons for staff. Some of the walls are hand-painted, and there is a hand-carved staircase.

The home sits on one hectare, borders the Los Angeles Country Club and has a pool. Hefner, who turns 83 next month, owns the house with his second wife, 1989's Playmate of the Year. The couple are separated but have two sons, who are soon to head to college. Hefner has lived at the neighboring Playboy Mansion with three young women for the past several years.

A sexier sex symbol, **Robert Pattinson**, says he wasn't prepared to film his first graphic scenes for the upcoming period drama *Little Ashes*. The *Twilight* actor

portrays Spanish artist Salvador Dali as a young man. He tells *GQ* magazine's April issue that he was uncomfortable as crew members watched and giggled during his steamy interlude with a male co-star.

"In a lot of ways, I was kind of crossing lines of what I thought I was comfortable doing," he said. "I had to do all this naked stuff." The British heartthrob says he wanted to try "something weird," but the part was more difficult than he'd anticipated. Pattinson has found a way to take the edge off before: he took a quarter of a Valium pill before his *Twilight* audition.

Alan Livingston, an entertainment industry executive who brought "Beatlemania" to the US, died of age-related causes at his Beverly Hills home, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Saturday. He was 91.

Livingston signed the Beatles in the 1960s while president of Capitol Records and also created the popular children's character Bozo the Clown in the 1940s.

— AGENCIES