

FEATURES

MONDAY, JULY 13, 2009

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West End musicals now queuing up for American passports shift the focus away from traditional virtues of the genre to goofy pageantry or more modest presentations that treat musicals with an emotional intimacy usually reserved for drama

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NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LONDON

Dress 'em to the teeth, or strip 'em down to their skivvies. That's how London is treating its musicals these days. Broadway producers shopping the West End for souvenir song-and-dance shows to take home will find they come in two sizes: extra-large and loud (like the ear-blasting, eye-scalding *Sister Act* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) or stylishly pre-shrunk (the scaled-down revivals of *La Cage aux Folles* and *A Little Night Music*). But it seems safe to say that none of them are going to be the next *Billy Elliot*.

As the show that dominated the Tony Awards this year, *Billy Elliot* renewed Broadway's interest in the British musical. (It had style, it had splash, it had heart, and people even seemed to follow a story told in a rough, regional vernacular.) And since theater producers, like their brethren in Hollywood, tend to keep working a successful mold until it cracks beyond repair, you can expect at least several musicals now in London to cross the Atlantic.

Such prospects go against the longstanding prejudice in the US that while the Britons speak the classics beautifully (their way with Shakespeare, my dear — too divine), they can't really sell song and dance with a Broadway huckster's pizzazz. (Years ago, when I asked an American theater-critic friend how Catherine Zeta-Jones was in the movie version of *Chicago*, he said witheringly, "It's a good English musical performance.")

But there are no people like show people, of whatever nationality, when it comes to covering blemishes with makeup and bony bodies with padding. The West End musicals now queuing up for American passports shift the focus away from traditional virtues of the genre, like shiver-inducing voices and choreography. The emphasis is instead on goofy pageantry (a long chorus line of nuns or cross-dressed men — take your choice — in increasingly outrageous costumes) or more modest presentations that treat musicals with an emotional intimacy usually reserved for drama.

Broadway's latest infatuation with the London musical has been evolving for roughly a decade. The mind-bogglingly silly *Mamma Mia!*, which opened here in 1999 (and on Broadway in 2001), ushered in a flood of mostly lame dancing jukeboxes. And resourcefully low-budget, single-set productions of Stephen Sondheim musicals — John Doyle's *Sweeney Todd* and the Menier Chocolate Factory's production of *Sunday in the Park With George* — initiated a less-is-more vogue of snob hits.

Of course, there was a time, 20 years or so ago, when London colonized Broadway with the masterfulness of Queen Victoria's Foreign Office. That was the era of the lushly scored costume poperetta (*The Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Miss Saigon*, *Les Miserables*), staged like Cecil B. DeMille epics and usually overseen by the Mike Todd-ish producer Cameron Mackintosh.

Such offerings, perfect for the gilded age of Reagan, were part of a diet too rich to be sustained indefinitely, and none of the creators associated with that time ever again scaled those peaks. (The composer Andrew Lloyd Webber these days has been most visible here as a judge on a television reality-show competition for the lead in a West End musical.) Mackintosh, though, has hardly given up and is handsomely represented in the West End this season by a revival of the 1960 musical *Oliver!*, adapted from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. (To be precise, it is a revival of Mackintosh's 1994 revival, with a new director, Rupert Goold, replicating and re-tuning the work of its previous director, Sam Mendes.)

For old-fashioned, picture-postcard prettiness, it's hard to top this *Oliver!*, which fills every inch of the vast, deep stage at the Theater Royal Drury Lane with Anthony Ward's period designs. Mackintosh has written that he hoped to assemble a show "in the grand Victorian manner that Dickens himself so enjoyed." And that's exactly what he has achieved: a multilevel, fluidly shifting diorama that recreates 19th-century London street scenes and interiors with "ooh"-inspiring detail.

Lionel Bart's sticky, skipping score seems to lose weight amid this opulence. And Matthew Bourne's busy, muscular and very well-synchronized choreography has an assembly-line effect (perhaps as a nod to Dickens' concerns about industrial-age dehumanization). When the chorus tells the title character to consider himself "part of the furniture," it seems a bit too apt.

But character is secondary here. This means that it doesn't matter much that Jodie Prenger — an actress previously best known for winning a television weight-loss competition before she won a leading role in



London's musicals: intimate or outsized?

Oliver! in another television competition — is merely passable as the gold-hearted prostitute Nancy. Still, the comedian Rowan Atkinson miraculously stands out — and even hunched, stands tall — on a crowded stage with a vivid performance as an anxious, epicene Fagin.

Though their leading ladies are of different sexes, *Sister Act* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* are remarkably (and wearably) similar. Both are adapted from popular movies; both capitalize on nostalgia for disco-era music and fashions (shudder); and both enjoy dressing up their characters in extravagantly silly get-ups and putting them on parade. They are musicals that belong to the order that the wimple-wearing heroine of *Sister Act* claims to hail from: "Our Lady of Perpetual Excess." But they also come down comfortingly on the side of family values, with the stipulation that families now come in all sorts of flavors.

Based on the 1992 Whoopi Goldberg movie about a lounge singer on the lam who disguises herself as a nun, *Sister Act: A Divine Musical Comedy* has pushed the show back to the 1970s. This allows the composer Alan Menken to whip up homages to vintage disco and soul performers (Barry White, the Pointer Sisters, Donna Summer) and wistful, music-box ballads like the ones he wrote for *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. It all feels woefully secondhand, despite those phalanxes of brightly robed, twirling nuns, urged to "shake it like you're Mary Magdalene," led by an earnest Patina Miller in the Goldberg role.

"They had bulges in their pockets, and I doubt it was because they were glad to see me." Those words, as it happens, were spoken by the Mother Superior (the estimable Sheila Hancock) in *Sister Act*, but they could easily have come from the musical adaptation of the 1994 cult favorite *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

Directed by Simon Phillips, this production features lots of interpolated pop songs made famous by Kylie Minogue, Gloria Gaynor, the Village People, et alia. The show is essentially a temple for its way-over-the-top costumes (designed by Tim Chappel and Lizzy Gardiner), suggesting that while old-style showgirls may be sexist anachronisms, a similar lineup of male glamazons makes for contemporary family fun. Within the surfeit of glitter, Tony Sheldon pulls off a touching and nuanced performance as a dowager transsexual. (Maybe his character and Atkinson's should get together.)

The season's other big cross-dressing musical is, uh, small. That's the surprisingly appealing revival of *La Cage aux Folles*, Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's 1983 musical, adapted from the French movie from ... (Oh, not again. Can I skip this part?). I was in no hurry to see *La Cage* after the slick and empty Broadway revival of 2004. But this version, directed by Terry Johnson and imported from the Menier Chocolate Factory in the Southwark neighborhood, triumphs by being anti-slick.

Starring the sublime Roger Allam (in a part originated, to acclaim, by Douglas Hodge in this revival) and Philip Quast

as the couple who run a tourist-friendly Riviera transvestite revue, this *La Cage* is sweet, seedy and affectingly human. The nightclub of the title is presented as a run-down joint, and its "girls" are very (very) obviously men beneath their feathers and bustiers. The discrepancy between aspiration and reality is always clear.

Allam, a strapping fellow who wears his dresses with sincerity, and Quast traffic charmingly in the old-style conventions of the British music hall and melodrama. They're the most engaging old couple of tramps this side of Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart in the West End *Waiting for Godot*.

The Menier, the big little theatrical powerhouse of the moment, is also responsible for the West End transfer of *A Little Night Music*, directed by Trevor Nunn at the Garrick Theater. (The Menier's tiny, improbably fertile stage is currently home to a new West End edition of Gerard Alessandrini's *Forbidden Broadway*, which offers delicious — and spot-on — spoofs of *La Cage* and *Night Music*.)

Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's musical reworking of Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film *Smiles of a Summer's Night*, about love's labors and losses, is a more obvious candidate for the bare-bones approach. Sondheim's songs are introspective, and a mostly naked stage in a smallish theater allows audiences the feeling of eavesdropping on swirling thoughts set to three-quarter time.

Such a character-driven production is only as good as its cast, and the London performers are sometimes only adequate. (It is reportedly being recast, top to bottom, for its coming Broadway incarnation.) But when it works, it has a rueful and unusually specific emotional clarity.

When Hannah Waddingham — the tall, endearingly awkward actress playing the disorganized actress Desiree — sings *Send In the Clowns*, you feel privy to a private and privileged conversation. I wouldn't swap those few quiet moments of song for three hours of

From left: Roger Allam, center, in *La Cage aux Folles*; Hannah Waddingham in the revival of *A Little Night Music* at the Garrick Theater; cast members in Cameron Mackintosh's revival of *Oliver!* at the Theater Royal Drury Lane.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

PLANET POP

Michael Jackson's father alleged Friday that "foul play" led to his son's death on June 25.



Joe Jackson's comments to ABC News came amid growing indications that the criminal abuse of prescription drugs killed Jackson, and as celebrity news Web site TMZ.com reported that at least two of Jackson's doctors were not cooperating with the coroner's request for the pop icon's medical records.

Also Friday the custody hearing to determine the guardianship of Michael Jackson's three children was postponed from today to July 20, according to Los Angeles Superior Court. The postponement was made at the request of the musician's mother, Katherine Jackson, who has temporary guardianship of Jackson's three children, and the musician's ex-wife, Debbie Rowe.

Los Angeles police chief William Bratton said Thursday the case could be probed as a criminal one, and not a death investigation. "We are still awaiting corroboration

The Daily Express owes Kate Beckinsale more than US\$32,000.

PHOTO: AP

from the coroner's office as to cause of death. That is going to be very dependent on the toxicology reports that are due to come back," Bratton told broadcaster CNN.

"And based on those, we will have an idea of what it is we are dealing with: Are we dealing with a homicide or are we dealing with accidental overdose?"

Jackson's father backed up those assertions: "I do believe it was foul play."

The Jackson family is still waiting for the results of the pop star's official autopsy and the independent autopsy.

Jim Carrey is going to be a grandfather.

Carrey's spokeswoman, Marleah Leslie, says his 21-year-old daughter, Jane Carrey, is expecting her first child.

The father is her fiance, rock musician Alex Santana. Leslie had no details on when the Los Angeles-based singer — who fronts the Jane Carrey Band — is expected to give birth.

In a statement issued by

Leslie, Jim Carrey says he's "very excited" and "Jane is going to be a great mom." She is the 47-year-old actor's daughter with his first wife, Melissa.

Carrey's longtime partner is **Jenny McCarthy**, who has a son, Evan, from a previous marriage.

Actress **Kate Beckinsale** accepted \$20,000 (US\$32,400) in libel damages at the High Court on Thursday over a story in the *Daily Express* newspaper that she was set to miss out on her dream role as Barbarella.

The 35-year-old star of films like *Pearl Harbor*, *Underworld* and *Van Helsing* was not in court for the settlement of her action against Express Newspapers, the Press Association reported.

Her solicitor said that the story in the *Express* last month was entirely false and had caused considerable embarrassment and harm. Beckinsale was never in discussions about the film role and there was never a possibility she would be part of the project.

It followed that she had not been passed over in favor of

rival Hollywood actress **Rose McGowan**, as the story claimed.

Robert Plant received a royal honor from **Prince Charles** at Buckingham Palace on Friday, putting the former Led Zeppelin front man one notch above his old bandmate **Jimmy Page**.

But, Plant joked he and Page would not be fighting over rank, even though Plant's new Commander of the British Empire is a higher honor than Page's Order of the British Empire.

"If we can remember each other's phone number at this time in life it's a miracle," he joked. "We're still good friends, we both enjoy a rather dark sense of humor that comes, I think, from being from rather the wrong side of the tracks for all those wild years."

Also receiving the CBE on Friday was English actress **Liz Smith**, 87, who appeared on the British TV series *The Royle Family*.

It's a boy for **Jason Priestley** and his wife, Naomi. The actor's representative, Marla Farrell, says



Robert Plant is one up on Jimmy Page.

PHOTO: AP

the Priestleys welcomed a healthy baby boy in Los Angeles on Thursday. Farrell says the couple refused to offer further details.

This is the second child for the pair, who have a two-year-old daughter, Ava.

Priestley, who turns 40 next month, played Brandon Walsh on the long-running '90s teen drama *Beverly Hills, 90210*. His wife is a makeup artist.

The couple were married in 2005.

—AGENCIES