



Schwartz Launches L.A. Musical Festival

By James Sims

My fellow playgoers, the state of the American musical is strong, especially in Los Angeles, or so says Broadway composer Stephen Schwartz of *Wicked* fame.

The theatrical industry was abuzz Wednesday morning as a smattering of Broadway's most successful American composers gathered in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion's Founder's Room in downtown Los Angeles, kicking off the Festival of New American Musicals.

In what was billed as a press conference to announce the cross-cultural musical theatre festival, taking place all through Southern California from May through June 2008, the event quickly turned into a celebration of the American musical art form. The day included candid performances of new works by Schwartz, Jason Robert Brown, Georgia Stitt, Michael Arden and surprisingly from the day's host, actor Jason Alexander, all of whom represent some of the talents expected to participate in the month long festival next year.

Los Angeles, often the brunt of many a joke involving the lack of live theatre in general, was built up as a vital force in the new wave of original American musicals, aside from a quick self-deprecating barb by Alexander, joking that musical theatre is to Los Angeles as fish is to chocolate.

"We suddenly find ourselves in another golden age of the American musical," said Schwartz.

"It's enormously exciting, and some of the reasons for that are here with us today. And I have found, contrary to its reputation, that Los Angeles is a very hospitable place and a great environment for new musical theatre to flourish. We are having a great experience with *Wicked* now and I'm just seeing so many good things here over the years. And I think the enthusiasm in musical theatre is definitely on the rise here."



Schwartz, singing a new song from a musical he contributed to surrounding the life of author Hans Christian Anderson, originally performed in 2005 in Copenhagen, noted there have been talks to adapt the musical into English,

hopefully getting produced sometime in the near future.

Other rather promising sounding songs were presented, including an extremely hysterical number from Brown's current project, a musical adaptation of the 1995 film "Leaving Las Vegas," sung by the composer with a sly delivery. Arden also is working on translating a film to the musical stage, although a slightly more sinister one, "The Talented Mr. Ripley," of which he performed a number surrounding the death of a character.



Brown's involvement with the Los Angeles musical theatre scene is perhaps the most current, having recently staged the world premiere of his teen-based 13, which took place next door to the Pavilion at the Mark Taper Forum. His wife, Stitt, who is currently hard at work as the vocal coach on NBC's "Grease: You're the One that I Want," also took to the stage in support of the festival, performing a lovely original number.

Executive produced by Marcia Seligson and Bob Klein, the Festival of New American Musicals will include fully staged new works, readings, workshops, cabarets and a handful of other musical theatre incarnations, most setting up shop in the major Los Angeles performing arts companies.

Klein, inferring that this festival has aspirations of becoming an annual Southland tradition, pointed out why planners chose Los Angeles to progress the genre. "I think in New York, they are too close to it... here we understand what is going on and we want to take advantage of it... frankly we would like to change the perception of New York as the theatre town and Los Angeles as the movie town." He explained that the festival has enlisted "theatres, high schools and colleges throughout the area to stage new American musicals and showcase their creators."

Some of the organizations already committed to presenting works for the festival are the Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Rubicon Theatre and Pepperdine University, and according to Klein there are plenty more in the works, hopefully comprising the Geffen Playhouse, Pasadena Playhouse, Old Globe Theatre and UCLA Live! to name a few.

Southern California already has been the launching pad for many critically acclaimed American musicals, including Jersey Boys (La Jolla Playhouse), The Drowsy Chaperone (Ahmanson Theatre), Dirty Rotten Scoundrels (Old Globe) and initial readings of Wicked (Universal Studios). Planned festival premieres already committed to are Snapshots, a new musical revue based on the songs of Schwartz, Sarah Plain and Tall in a west coast premiere and My Antonia, a work by Schwartz's son Scott and of which Schwartz also contributed.

"There is probably more theatre in any given day going on in Los Angeles than there is in New York City," said Alexander. "With the help of people like Marcia (Seligson) who created the Reprise series... they have created this festival, which we think is going to be absolutely vital, not only to Los Angeles' theatre scene but to the American musical theatre scene."

And as Schwartz alluded to, the American musical is having a new high, with listings for

last week on Broadway totaling 27 shows, 23 of which are musicals, including 12 that are new American musicals. Klein, holding up the Variety legit clipping, happily pointed out that looking back five years ago, that number was a paltry four.



James Sims is a freelance writer for The Hollywood Reporter. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he has been a part of the entertainment industry one way or another his entire life. He spent a couple years hosting a morning radio show in South Korea before returning to Los Angeles to pursue a career as an entertainment journalist. James worked for various radio stations around California as well as worked a short while with Entertainment Tonight/The Insider. An avid musical theatre enthusiast, he is constantly traveling to New York to stay caught up with the latest happenings on Broadway. His next goal, to prove to the world that Los Angeles really does have some “high culture” left through shedding light on some of its prime theatre happenings. Although he is still trying to decide if David Zippel’s lyrics from “City of Angels” hold any truth, “L.A., truth to tell, is not much different than a pretty girl with the clap.”

“What impresses me most about the festival is its producers vision for developing new and young musical theatre audiences around Southern California,” said the festival’s honorary chairperson, composer Stephen Sondheim, in an e-mail read by Seligson. “By working with ethnically diverse high schools and colleges, and helping them produce new musicals in their schools, the organizers hope to ignite a passion for theatre in these young people... another way to open the door to a life long love of musical theatre.”

For more information on the Festival of New American Musical, visit their website at www.lafestival.org.

Photos Top: Stephen Schwartz by Walter McBride/Retna Ltd., Middle: Jason Robert Brown and Georgia Stitt by Craig Brockman, Bottom: Jason Alexander by Linda Lenzi.