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L.A. gets tuned up

Duo launches musical incubator next year

By Phil Gallo

The first English language production of Stephen Schwartz's Hans Christian Andersen musical, the premiere of a suite of music from Ricky Ian Gordon's "The Grapes of Wrath" and a production of Scott Schwartz's "My Antonia" have been inked to be part of the first Festival of New American Musicals in May and June 2008.

Marcia Seligson, producing artistic director of Reprise! Broadway's Best from its inception in 1995 until 2005, and Reprise! board member Bob Klein have created the festival as an umbrella organization that will coordinate full productions, staged readings and workshops of musicals, cabaret shows, concerts, master classes and other events over the course of two months.

The executive producers intend to partner with more than 30 Los Angeles area performing arts organizations, each of which will produce a new American musical during the festival time period.

Pepperdine U. will present "Sarah Plain and Tall" June 4-7, 2008, at the school's Smothers Theater with the intention of taking it to the Edinburgh Festival afterward. Jason Robert Brown, the composer of "13," will perform a concert of his music. The Los Angeles Master Chorale will perform "Grapes of Wrath" at Walt Disney Concert Hall on May 18, 2008.

Reps of the Rubicon Theater in Ventura will stage three new musicals as part of its 2007-08

season including "My Antonio," "It's Only My Life" and a third tuner still in development.



Stephen Schwartz's Hans Christian Andersen musical will be presented at a new L.A. festival in 2008.

Seligson explained that each producing entity, whether it be a high school or a theater, will finance their own production while the festival will market the entirety of the event. They are looking for corporate sponsorship; they have some foundation grants and are applying for more.

The goal is to raise between \$500,000 and \$1 million before opening night.

They already have 60 or 70 projects that are being reviewed; potential tuners have come in via Seligson's Reprise! contacts and ASCAP's musical theater program. Composer-lyricist Stephen Schwartz ("Wicked," "Pippin") and

Michael Kerker, director of musical theater at performing rights org ASCAP, are the primary advisers for the fest. Fest organizers have also reached out to BMI's musical theater reps.

"Every new musical is looking for a regional production," said Seligson, noting that the org is feeding off the belief that Southern California has become a hot breeding ground for tuners.

"Southern California has a passionate talent pool," Klein said. "We'd like to change the perception about Los Angeles as a theater town."

To drive the point home, the festival was launched in a ballroom at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and featured performances of music by established composers. Jason Alexander was the host and performed a piece from his musical adaptation of Richard Bach's "Illusions."

Stephen Schwartz performed a piece from his Hans Christian Andersen musical; actor-composer Michael Arden played a tune from his in-development musical version of "The Talented Mr. Ripley"; and Jason Robert Brown delivered a humorous number from his adaptation of "Honeymoon in Vegas." Brown's wife, Georgia Stitt, the vocal coach on NBC's "Grease: You're the One That I Want," represented the cabaret side and performed the title track from her upcoming CD "This Ordinary Thursday."

"This will be vital not only to the L.A. theater scene but the national theater scene as well," Alexander said.

The larger Los Angeles and San Diego theaters have yet to announce whether or how they will be participating in the program. Exec producers did say they are reviewing material with Geffen Playhouse, Pasadena Playhouse, Old Globe Theater and UCLA Live!

The Hollywood Bowl hopes to present a concert that would celebrate the works of major composers and up-and-comers with the composers onstage.