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THEATER

NYC 2003

Just Out takes on the gayest Broadway season ever

BY JON KRETZU

Despite the tragedy of 9/11, persistent terrorist threats, SARS paranoia, a precipitous decline in tourism and a steadily depressing national economy, New York City somehow manages to rise above—like the gutsy lady she is. There is still no more exciting place to spend a week filled to overflowing with theater, dance, music and art or just reveling in the sheer joy of spending time in this unique adult playground.

Broadway had one of its best seasons in recent memory this year—every show I saw was filled to capacity (despite the never-ending rise in ticket prices, which now top out at \$101 for all musicals and even a few straight plays). These sold-out crowds responded to everything with rapture.

It was also the gayest season in memory. There were gay plays, gay musicals, shows with gay subtext (we all know Frog and Toad were just a bit more than pond buddies), shows with gay diva icons feasting on scenery (God bless Bernadette, Vanessa and Harvey) and shows that were just so fabulous they were gay by association. It all reached an apotheosis in the Tony Awards, which were almost an entirely gay affair with the sole exception of host Hugh Jackman's hair.

The excitement was palpable wherever I went, and nowhere more so than at this year's Producers phenomenon: *Hairspray*.

This musical adaptation of John Waters' camp classic is a monster hit, and deservedly so. Basically a good old-fashioned musical (with a truly funny book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan and a clever and catchy score by Marc Shaiman and Scott Whitman), *Hairspray* tweaks the traditional form with a wealth of gay humor, sweetly subversive in-jokes, wild '60s surrealist designs and a healthy smattering of new millennium political correctness—all of which the audience laps up like parched puppies.

The wonderful cast is led by the iconic Harvey Fierstein (gay, of course!), reprising Divine's original film role as Edna Turnblad. Fierstein delivers possibly the greatest drag leading lady performance in musical theater history with wit, affection and razor-sharp timing. To watch him and the ageless Dick Latessa do their star-turn duet "Timeless to Me" is to experience pure musical comedy bliss.

The rest of the *Hairspray* ensemble are all



Dick Latessa and Harvey Fierstein's star-turn in *Hairspray* is pure musical comedy bliss. Inset: John Waters takes a bow at the production's opening last year in New York



expert, particularly leading lady Marissa Jaret Winokur as Tracy Turnblad, whose energy could light up several Broadway theaters. All in all, if you miss *Hairspray* you're missing two hours of total joy.

The only other new musical of note this season is a real surprise. Choreographer Twyla Tharp has taken the entire catalog of Billy Joel's classic rock 'n' roll songs and used them as the inspiration for a thrilling two-act dance drama called *Movin' Out*. Joel's tough and tender tunes—played by a kick-ass band led by the talented Michael Cavanaugh—provide the launching pad for Tharp's dazzling choreography and dramatic invention.

Every member of the *Movin' Out* cast is a remarkable dancer/actor, but mention must be made of its leading quartet: the amazing fire-brand Elizabeth Parkinson, the lyrical Ashley Tuttle, the sinuous David Gomez and, above all, John Selya, who gives the single greatest dance performance I've seen since Baryshnikov's glory days. *Movin' Out* is a rare combination of music, dance and drama—a Broadway ballet—that astoundingly and exhilarates.



Gay actor Denis O'Hare's nebbish accountant (left) finds a reason to love baseball in *Take Me Out*

This season's other musical highlights can be found in a pair of marvelous revivals. *Nine* is Maury Yeston's adaptation of Fellini's film masterpiece *8 1/2*. Its seductive score and dreamlike book needs a strong directorial design hand to pull its varied strands into place. Unfortunately, this popular and very glamorous production lacks just this element of cohesion, and it simply pales against the memory of Tommy Tune's original 1972 production. The original was art; the revival is a magazine layout.

Nine is basically hampered by David Levieux's excessively Euro-centric, so-chic-and-metaphoric-it's-incomprehensible direction and an unwieldy design. (What is with that flooding stage and toy gondola sequence wherein all those gorgeous women have to carefully remove their faux-Manolo Blahnik pumps and splash about self-consciously in ankle-deep water?)

The *Nine* ensemble, however, soars above the silliness. Movie star internationale Antonio Banderas is perfectly cast in the Marcello Mastroianni role, and he certainly does everything within decency to seduce the audience—he sings beautifully, is effortlessly charming and pours on the Latin emoting when necessary.

Chita Rivera is imperious, timelessly beautiful and just plain delicious in an ultra-fabulous tango routine with Mr. Banderas; Jane Krakowski is gorgeous, sultry and surprisingly moving; and Mary Stuart Masterson is sleek, sings well and just about manages to overcome her sub-spaghetti-and-meatballs dialect with nuance and style.

The other current revival on view, however, is far more effective. *Gypsy* is one of Broadway's greatest achievements—the most heartbreaking musical ever written. Its portrait of renowned stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and her powerhouse mother is as strong as musical drama gets.

Sam Mendes, one of the best directors working today, delivers a devastating production that truly honors the show's tragic core. He is also blessed with the Mama Rose of Bernadette