

The Roundabout's revival of John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim's brilliant *Assassins* also suffers from overkill. As if to make the disturbing musical collage more palatable to Broadway audiences, director Joe Mantello (who won a Tony, go figure) has devised a production that neuters the show's dark power with lots of cheap jokes and surface glitz. What should be both chilling and difficult material is now just another show, albeit one with a slight streak of blasé postmodernist shtick. Brecht-Lite.

The strangest revival this year is David Leveaux's refined reinterpretation of *Fiddler on the Roof*. This production has many lovely components—a gorgeous moonlit forest setting, an impeccably rehearsed cast (this is surely the sole Russian peasant village to have vocal coaches) and a sumptuous-sounding orchestra that shares the stage with the actors.

Alfred Molina (*Spider-Man 2*'s Doc Ock) is a marvelous actor, but his work here seems oddly tranquilized. His Tevye is devoid, like the rest of the production, of passion, grit and deep-seated human need. This *Fiddler*'s Martha Stewart *shred* décor, artfully tossed autumn leaves, deconstructivist hovels and oddball Cirque du Anatevka dream sequence seem the work of musical-comedy-loving aliens with exquisite taste and absolutely no insight into human behavior.

When it comes to the year's crop of important new plays, the news continues to be disappointing. The winner of both the Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize for Best Play of 2003 shows just how dismal a season it was.

Doug Wright is a quirky, intriguing playwright, but the much-lauded *I Am My Own Wife* turns out to be much less than the sum of its mini-parts. Unfortunately, the character study of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a real-life German transvestite who somehow managed to survive both the Nazis and the Communists while simultaneously running both a cultural museum and nightclub/brothel, sounds more

fascinating than it actually was, and Wright does little to make it engrossing.

The device of having one actor portray Charlotte along with 40 or so other characters is the script's sole interesting idea, and Jefferson Mays does a fantastic job of channeling all of them. But the grating deployment of Wright utilizing his own angst in writing the play as a device gets stale very quickly.

Much more impressive is Bryony Lavery's haunting *Frozen*. This chamber work about the darkest depths of human behavior and the eternal possibility of forgiveness is remarkable, but while the Broadway production offers two superb performances in Swoosie Kurtz and Brian F. O'Byrne, it ultimately falls short of the script's potential.

The self-conscious staging and finicky, mannered light and sound design serve only to distance the audience rather than draw it in. This evocative play will no doubt be seen to better advantage around the country.

The season's biggest off-Broadway hit also is a bit of a letdown. Acclaimed Chicago actor and playwright Tracy Letts (who could forget his outrageous trailer trash melodrama *Killer Joe*?) has fashioned an intriguing paranoid premise in his new play *Bug*. This extended *X-Files* episode does get under the skin and is wonderfully acted by a crackerjack cast, but its sense of mounting dread ends up being a bit of a tease. Once again, the whole does not quite add up to the promise of its creepy parts.

Finally, the best New York work this season isn't a play or a musical but the legendary Barbara Cook in her newest concert, *Barbara Cook's Broadway*. Her remarkable artistry blends together a vocal instrument of incomparable beauty with an emotional depth and interpretive honesty second to none. To witness her, at the astounding age of 77, still weave her magic is the season's most luminous event. **J**

JON KRETZU is associate artistic director of Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland.

Double take

Gender-bending musical revue debuts at Miracle

BY MEG DALY

"All the best songs are taken by women," lamented Kirk Herring to friends in 1998. More often we hear women decrying the lack of good female roles, but the longtime musical performer envisioned a different type of musical, in which men sing the female roles, and women sing the men's.

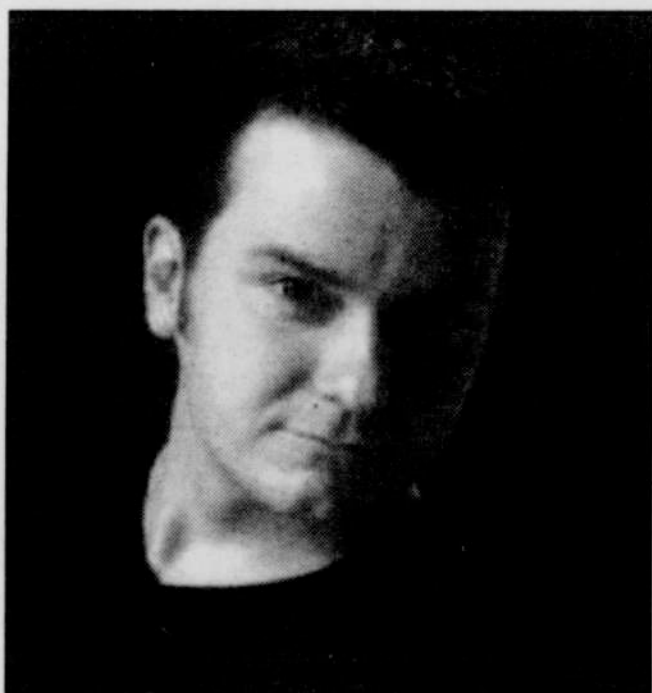
Fast-forward six years and find *Flip Side*, a musical revue of some of the best-loved Broadway tunes strung together to form a storyline about love, loss and desire, which runs Aug. 20 to 28 at Miracle Theatre. And every song is sung by the opposite gender.

Herring is quick to emphasize that the actors will not be in drag. Nor will they change the pronouns in the songs. Instead, what quickly emerges is a same-sex romantic subtext, in which, for instance, one female character muses that "She Loves Me," while her object of desire maintains that she's a "Proud Lady" who likes to get around (*The Baker's Wife*).

And haven't you always wanted to see gay men do Chicago's "Cell Block Tango"?

Herring—who wrote, directed and appears in *Flip Side*—says it's a sort of social experiment with the audience. He wants to challenge stereotypes about gender and portray men "being hormonal" and women as "cads."

The production is being presented by Met-



Kirk Herring wrote and stars in *Flip Side*

ropolitan Church of Portland as a benefit for its Esther's Pantry program, which provides groceries and personal care items to people living with AIDS. Esther's Pantry director and MCC music director Steven Couch is the musical director for the show.

Herring, who played leading roles in the Broadway production of *Phantom of the Opera* and San Francisco's *Beach Blanket Babylon*, says his *Flip Side* cast includes "some of the most gifted, professional actors I've had the chance to work with."

The weeklong production is followed by a reprisal of the show during a Sept. 11 gala event for Esther's Pantry at Montgomery Park. Tickets for the Miracle Theatre run are \$12-\$19. Ticket for the gala are \$110, and both are available from 503-281-8868. **J**

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