

# Sister Musical Gets Its Act Together

Composer Alan Menken—"as funny as, if not funnier than, the movie"

By David C. Nichols

**E**VEN AMID THE SLEW OF THEATRICAL EVENTS, the world premiere of *Sister Act, The Musical*, which opens Nov. 3 at the Pasadena Playhouse, has sparked major interest.

"Our advance sale is higher than it's ever been for any show," says Sheldon Epps, Artistic Director of the Playhouse, "even higher than the sales were for *Fences*." Given the SRO houses for the Playhouse's recent revival of the August Wilson classic, this speaks volumes about the audience appeal of *Sister Act*.

The Pasadena run, helmed by producer/director Peter Schneider (*Grand Hotel*), is a LORT co-presentation with Atlanta's venerated Alliance Theatre, where this production will travel early next year. Like its source material, the hit 1992 film starring Whoopi Goldberg, *Sister Act* follows Deloris Van Cartier, a Nevada club singer who, after witnessing a murder ordered by her boss/boyfriend, goes into protective custody at a failing convent and transforms it and herself.

Its potential struck Epps when Schneider brought it up almost two years ago. "I had lunch with Peter, maybe 18 months back," Epps recalls. "We were discussing possible shows for the Playhouse and he mentioned *Sister Act*. For the first time in my life as an artistic director and producer, I said yes to a project the instant it was mentioned. It seemed so right and exciting."

Schneider agrees. "Tom Schumacher of Disney Theatricals had suggested *Sister Act* as one of several non-Disney-branded titles they wanted to license for production," he says. "It's a spectacular title. But there's also the curse of promise. Our challenge is to surpass people's memories of how they think they recall the movie. Oscar Wilde once said, 'A revival has to be twice as good as the original because you remember the original twice as good as it was.' If we've done our job right, you're going to walk in with one set of expectations and walk out going, 'That's what I remember,' though it's significantly different."

Acclaimed tunesmith Alan Menken (*Little Shop of Horrors*, *Beauty and the Beast*) echoes the excitement. "All my scores go through ebbs and flows of enthusiasm, my perspective," says multiple Oscar-winner Menken. "But, this one may be the hottest one since *Little Shop*. It just jumps out at you. I'm about writing the songs that mug you. If you look at *Little Shop*, the Disney films, yes, the songs make a dramatic point. But that's not their sole function." The approach suits *Sister Act*, which features lyrics by Glenn Slater and a book by Cheers writer-producers Cheri and Bill Steinkellner.

Ironically, when Schneider approached him about the show, Menken almost declined. "I was

loaded down with other projects," recalls Menken who wound up working on seven different projects this last season, including the upcoming stage version of *The Little Mermaid*, *The Snow Queen* for Tokyo Disney and *Sister Act*.

"Everyone who works in the theatre long enough has had the experience of being over the moon about a show, and whether in rehearsal or tryouts, for whatever reason, it goes another way. But this has been a very pleasant surprise."

Epps observes, "It's rare with new musicals that the idea merits treatment. I get many submissions. When I say no, it's always because the idea made me ask, why do this as a musical if it's not an idea that sings? This one made immediate sense."

With a club singer protagonist, there is plenty of affectionate pastiche, though Menken says, "I didn't want to mimic the movie, just do Motown." His influences include Donna Summer, Curtis Mayfield, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, Rick James, disco, funky, '70s style. "It's an eclectic score," he notes. As for church music, he adds, "We do use the liturgical, sparingly. It opens with 'Light My Way,' a ballad for the nuns, and segues into 'Take Me to Heaven,' which presents Deloris and her backup girls. That opening disco medley becomes six numbers in one, as it sets up the plot, Deloris' relationship to boss Curtis, and so forth, as it develops

"Fabulous, Baby," written à la the Pointer Sisters, is "Deloris' character statement, what she wants in her life: 'I wanna be/Fabulous, baby,'" says Menken. In Pasadena, Dawnn Lewis, familiar as Jaleesa Vinson Taylor on *A Different World*, plays Deloris/Sister Mary Clarence. Menken describes the Act I number, "Raise Your Voice," where Deloris teaches the nuns to sing, as "a great big celebratory, rock-the-house moment," and "Goin' to Hell," which takes the order to a biker bar, as more "AC/DC meets liturgical." There is gentler character writing, such as "I Could Be That Guy," sung by Deloris' protective cop Sgt. Eddie (nicknamed "Sweaty Eddie"), and "Simple Life" which presents the Mother Superior.

This role is played by Elizabeth Ward Land (*The Trouble With Men*). Onstage, the character is closer in age to Deloris than in the movie. Schneider explains, "It's really about faith, how you may find redemption in the least likely places, and it's about two spiritual twins separated at birth. In the movie, the relationship was more mother and child. Here it's, well, more of a sister act."

Menken waxes rhapsodic over the performers. "Dawnn is fierce, so funny, just right, and though Elizabeth is younger than what we'd originally envisioned, she nails that character."



Alan Menken



Glenn Slater, Dawnn Lewis, Alan Menken, Peter Schneider, Elizabeth Ward Land, Cheri Steinkellner and Bill Steinkellner.

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Amy Murray is Sister Mary Patrick, “to die for, she makes you smile all over.” Audrie Neenan plays crusty Sister Mary Lazarus and Beth Malone is Sister Mary Robert, the novice who blooms under Deloris’ influence. Menken continues, “Almost everyone in this cast was in the reading and the quality of the cast, even at that point, was amazing. Harrison White is a great Curtis. David Jennings as Sgt. Eddie? Henry Polic II as the Monsignor? I love this cast.”

The reading Menken refers to took place in April. Epps also recalls it as “hugely exciting. In process, musicals are jigsaw puzzles. You have the people doing the music in one room, the staging in another, the book writers hole up somewhere and so forth. You can’t be sure what you’ve got until you put all the work together. That reading was the first time the piece was in sequence and I was stunned. It was entertaining, it was funny but it was also very moving, full of literal heart and soul.”

Schneider gives credit to Menken. “He wanted it to seem a piece of whole cloth. He’s succeeded.” And Menken gives major credit to the Steinkellners’ book—“as funny as, if not funnier than, the movie”—and Slater, with whom Menken has collaborated since his partnership with the late Howard

Ashman was coming to its sadly premature end.

Besides *Sister Act*, Slater supplied lyrics for the stage versions of *The Little Mermaid* and *Leap of Faith*, slated to star Hugh Jackman. Menken likes to work, “with my collaborator in the room. Glenn likes to go away and write a lyric.” This can be tricky when collaborators are in different cities, even different countries, while preparing a show. Menken notes, “My problem with juggling projects is standing with a ball in midair, i.e., a tune with no lyric, so you can’t do anything. Fortunately, Glenn’s the real deal,” says Menken, “very talented. Also, he’s a riot.”

That is what the creators hope *Sister Act, The Musical* will be. Epps feels that “the show will attract young people who may have been too young to have seen the movie but have seen it on video.” Schneider is just happy with the process. “I have had such a fantastic time with the process of creating this. It’s become a group communion. That’s what we want to bring to the collective audience, a really fun time, about how people can discover they’re better than they think they are.”

Menken observes, “The concept will bring people into the theatre but it’s our job to send them out on a high.” Musical lovers should say hallelujah to that. ■

#### **Sister Act, The Musical**

Opens Nov. 3  
Plays Tues.-Fri., 8 pm  
Sat., 5 and 9 pm  
Sun., 2 and 7 pm  
Ends Dec. 3  
Tickets: \$35 - \$100  
Pasadena Playhouse  
39 S. El Molino Ave.,  
Pasadena  
626-356-PLAY or  
[www.pasadenaplayhouse.org](http://www.pasadenaplayhouse.org)