

GERALD STERNBACH: JUST ANOTHER *SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH MOMMY*

By Deborah Behrens

IF ANYONE KNOWS THE SECRET to juggling the three-ring circus life of a musical director, conductor and songwriter/composer, it is Gerald Sternbach. Who else but someone who once wrote material for *The Greatest Show on Earth* could coax critically lauded performances from some of Broadway's foremost singing tigers and elephants?

This month Sternbach will test his true ringmaster skills as he prepares *Sunday in the Park with George*, the second production of his fifth season as the award-winning Musical Director for Reprise! Broadway's Best. It stars Tony nominees Kelli O'Hara (*A Light in the Piazza*) and Manolo Feliciano (*Sweeney Todd*), directed by Jason Alexander, to open Jan. 31. Simultaneously he'll be readying the world premiere of *Mommy Mommy the Musical Musical* as its composer, with book and lyrics by Elin Hampton, direction and choreography by Kay Cole, to debut Feb. 23 at the Hudson Guild Theatre.

Not to mention waiting to hear when CBS plans to air the musical reality show pilot he shot last fall based upon the European hit series *The Singing Office*. Or playing piano for Carrie Fisher's world premiere solo show *Wishful Drinking* (at the Geffen Playhouse until Jan. 7). A gig he landed in her lavatory.

"I literally did audition for Carrie in her bathroom," laughs Sternbach. "There's this Yamaha upright piano next to a door and she pulled up a chair. We did some rehearsals in there, too. The acoustics are great. She remembers lyrics to hundreds and hundreds of songs, especially from her mother's world. Debbie [Reynolds] was very protective of her and certain aspects of the show.

"Carrie is an incredibly fearless person," he adds. "She's one of those types of people who, as flawed as she might be within the context of her world, makes no mistakes in anything she does."

Sternbach began writing and composing music in the late '70s with a musical review called *A Five, Six, Seven, Eight* that ran for nearly two years at the Zephyr Theatre on Melrose. Collaborations with Amanda McBroom and Faye Greenberg soon followed in tandem with an eight year New York stint as associate conductor for Broadway shows *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *Merlin* and *The Tap Dance Kid*, the Los Angeles premiere company of *Les Misérables* and conductor for the national tour of *Song and Dance* starring Melissa Manchester.

A prominent vocal coach as well as veteran musical director of such benefits as S.T.A.G.E., *Divas Simply Singing*, *Les Girls* and Actors Fund, Sternbach

has accompanied stars ranging from Marilyn Horne to Kelsey Grammar to Carol Burnett. A self-described career highlight was seeing his song "Mary," co-written with Greenberg as a paean to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, performed by Eric McCormack on a TV Land awards show, in front of the sitcom's original cast.



Sternbach's circus days came in 1993 when friend Eric Michael Gillette, the singing ringmaster for Ringling Bros' Circus Red Unit, told him they were looking for original material. During the next five years, in collaboration with Lindy Robbins, Sternbach wrote songs and music for Gillette, tiger and elephant acts, jugglers and child performers.

"It was a really fun time," he admits. "The good thing about writing for the circus was that it's music for hire, so it's always nice to get paid. Passive income for writing songs is a very wonderful thing."

Musical director obligations would make it the last significant volume of writing Sternbach would accomplish until Cole told him *Mommy Mommy* was looking for a new composer to tackle an existing score.

"Kay thought Elin Hampton and I might be a really good match," he said. "We hit it off instantly. Elin is a wonderful writer and producer with a lot of television credits (*Mad About You*, *Pond Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Baby Bob*). She and her husband, TV Executive Producer David Fury, are producing *Mommy Mommy*.

"What is so wonderful is that we have this great collaboration. I brought in my musical sensibilities, helped restructure it and acted as dramaturge. So far I've re-written 14 songs. I'm not going to be playing the show but I'll definitely be musically supervising and doing all the vocal arranging."

Mommy Mommy tells the story of four women at different points in their life dealing with what it is like to be a new mom. One is a successful career woman who never thought she would have a child yet finds herself pregnant late in life. Next, a lesbian couple, in which one of the partners is a female rabbi, adopts two Chinese children. The last is a younger woman who attempts to stay in a relationship but instead finds herself going through a divorce.

"It's not really a story musical," admits Sternbach. "The story is essentially the personal growth and discovery process of women who choose parenting to confront and to deal with and to grow. Elin is the perfect example of who the piece is for because she's a successful career person who works very hard at having her context

as a mother and a wife but also as an artist.”

To Sternbach, *Sunday in the Park with George* offers a similar message. The Sondheim musical is one of his favorites. He remembers taking the night off from *Tap Dance Kid* to catch the show’s final preview performance.

“I think the show was finally frozen,” he recalls. “I was a mess at the end of the first act and a mess at the end of the second. The song that says ‘move on stop worrying where you’re going move on’ just floored me and destroyed me. It’s just an incredibly moving piece about dealing with art in the context of your life, which is not a dissimilar theme to the women in *Mommy Mommy*.”

Jason Alexander’s turn as director completes a circle with Sternbach that began 10 years ago when he starred in Reprise’s inaugural production of *Promises, Promises*. Sternbach was associate conductor to Peter Matz at the time and remembers the excitement of that first 1996 show.

“It’s such a cyclical thing to have Jason directing especially when he was so integral at the start. We hit the ground running with *Promises, Promises*. We sold out from the very

beginning and were so successful we had to extend. I’m really excited about working with him. He’s full of ideas and we’re going to do the complete orchestration. I couldn’t be happier. I’m looking forward to digging into it with the awesome talents of both Kelli and Manoel.”

Last November Sternbach finally won an Ovation Award for his musical direction of Reprise’s production of *Zorba*. He had been nominated five times before, often competing with himself in the same category as well as seven times by the Los Angeles Drama Critics without a single win. His *Zorba* nod bested his sister nomination for *On the Town*.

“I would have to put those in the top two of my experiences period,” he admits. “*On the Town* was a personal achievement for me, conducting Leonard Bernstein with a full orchestra. *Zorba* was one of those musicals that I wore out the recording. I literally wore out two LPs. It was really an astonishing experience. David Lee directing. Judy Kaye. Camille Saviola. I loved going to the theatre every night.

“I’ve won my Ovation Award. Now I can take the Susan Lucci thing out of my bio.” ■

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

Opens Jan. 31;
plays Tues.-Fri., 8pm;
Sat., 2 pm and 8 pm; Sun., 2
pm and 7 pm; ends Feb. 11
Tickets: \$70-\$75
\$20 student/senior rush 15
minutes before show times
(subject to availability)
Preview: Jan. 30, \$60
Freud Playhouse
UCLA MacGowan Hall
310.825.2101 or
www.reprise.org

MOMMY MOMMY THE MUSICAL MUSICAL

Opens Feb. 23:
plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun. 3 pm; ends May 13
Tickets: \$30
Hudson Guild Theatre
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323.965.9996 or
www.mommymommythe-
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