

HERSHEY FELDER Inhabits Gershwin...and Then Chopin

By Tom Provenzano

IN THE STANDARD WAY OF CIVILIZED FAMILY LIFE, Hershey Felder's parents started him in piano lessons at age seven. He seemed to take to it but it wasn't until he was 11 that those around him started wondering if there was something in the way of prodigy about this young man. At about the same time young Felder became intrigued with acting and his performing ambitions never abated. As an adult he found great international success on stage. All that was missing in his artistic soul was a perfect vehicle to combine his acting prowess with his piano virtuosity.

The personality of a prodigy is generally paired with a vibrant preconsciousness, which finds a way to express itself. Felder solved the problem by creating his own, highly successful hybrid theatrical musical event *George Gershwin Alone*, with collaboration of director Joel Zwick. In this critically lauded production, playing at the Geffen through July 22, Felder utterly inhabits Gershwin, the great composer who helped create

the American musical. "It's a dialogue with the audience," explains the performer. "George is appealing to the people who have loved him and helped him become an eternal composer. That's the overriding conceit. The truth is the play is about a man who died before he knew what would happen to his music."

Through research and actor's intuition, Felder knows his character intimately. He explains, "Gershwin is arguably the man who contributed the most to American music. I learned Gershwin from listening. His music illuminates who he is—he's snappy. But there is also

a kind of Russian sadness in the sound." In developing this solo play, it was important to Felder to never let his character be self-indulgent. "The important thing about this story is it was never meant to be an in-depth look, because George Gershwin was not an in-depth man. I don't mean that in a negative way. He said of himself: 'I am not someone who looks deep inside. I write beautiful music, I am a serious composer, but I am not into *Sturm und Drang* about my life.'

"I didn't think it would be fair or true to his character to make up stuff about his personal life. It wouldn't illuminate anything if I projected reasons he wrote certain music. The reason he wrote music like this is because he was a great composer with a tremendous amount of energy and the ability to capture American sound."

Although there were many musical influences on the boy Felder, Gershwin always held an enormous place in his soul. He discusses the seminal role of *Rhapsody in Blue*. "As a child I played that music. It touched me because of its greatness and it touched the public across the world. This man's accomplishments are astonishing. That is why I insist the story I tell is straightforward. It is a story not many people know. He is so important because he took jazz to the concert hall. He was the one who made it legitimate. As Rudy Vallee says, 'Gershwin made a lady out of jazz.'"

The success of *George Gershwin Alone* has allowed Felder to create two more solo evenings to complete a trilogy he has been planning for years. The second piece is *Monsieur Chopin*, set in Frédéric Chopin's salon in Paris, where he conducts a piano lesson in 1848, just days after the French Revolution. Chopin was even a greater influence on Felder than Gershwin. "As a composer, he is closer to my heart because I know him better. Chopin is the precious brilliant inventor of the piano."

This summer he will be performing both plays at San Diego's Old Globe in addition to the final part of the trilogy, titled *Beethoven*. "I've designed it in traditional sonata form," Felder explains. "The first movement is usually dramatic, intense and architectural, that's Beethoven. The second is usually romantic, that's Chopin and the third movement is always dance-like and extroverted, that's Gershwin. They were created backwards for the simple reason that in order to ingratiate the public to this kind of style we started with Gershwin who is the most popular. We felt people would have identification with it. Happily we were right. It is interesting how people who have seen Gershwin immediately come to Chopin to see what is next." ■



MARK GARVIN

Hershey Felder in performance with an image of George Gershwin in the background

GEORGE GERSHWIN ALONE

Plays Tues.-Thurs., 8 pm; Fri., 8:30 pm; Sat., 3 and 8 pm; Sun., 3 and 7:30 pm; through July 22

MONSIEUR CHOPIN

Opens Aug. 10; performances to be determined; through Aug. 19

Tickets: \$55. Adult rush tickets (\$35) and student rush tickets (\$15) available 10 minutes prior to curtain

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