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## NAMT Festival Touts New Musicals, Bigger Casts

By Simi Horwitz

Eclecticism has been the signature of the musicals showcased at the **National Alliance for Musical Theatre's Festival of New Musicals** for the past 17 years, and this year is no exception. But this time there is one unexpected unifying element, notes Kathy Evans, the organization's executive director.

"We certainly didn't plan it this way and only noticed it after the fact, but almost all of the eight musicals selected to participate are set in the past," she says. "It's nostalgia, I suppose. And there is something very American about looking to history as a source of inspiration."

Among the eight musicals to be showcased at Dodger Stages, Sept. 25-26, are "Ace," in which a disturbed youngster in 1952 takes a voyage back in time to World War I and World War II; "Caraboo, Princess of Javas," the story of a lower-class English girl in 1817 traveling to America to avoid becoming a maid; "The Funkentine Rapture," a comic allegory set in the 1970s; "Meet John Doe," based on the Frank Capra film and set during the Great Depression; and "River's End," a look at a daredevil honeymoon couple who disappears in the Grand Canyon in 1928.

The festival's mission is to promote and celebrate new musicals and "to facilitate meetings between musical writers and producers," explains Evans. It is designed exclusively for industry insiders -- commercial and noncommercial producers, agents, theatre owners, "anyone who is in a position to move a musical forward," she continues. "It's not open to critics or even the public. It's an invitation-only event. We're expecting approximately 1,500 people to attend this year's event."

To date, the festival has presented more than 170 musicals and 300 writers from across the globe. Among its success stories are "Thoroughly Modern Millie," which was seen at the festival before making its way to Broadway, and the Broadway-bound "Princesses."

But Broadway is not the only goal. Many shows launched at the festival have moved on to lives they might not have otherwise had on the regional theatre circuit. Last year, for example, five of the eight shows earned productions at such major venues as the Ahmanson Theatre and Goodspeed Musicals.

**The National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT)** is a nonprofit service organization composed of commercial and noncommercial producers, theatrical institutions of all sizes, presenting organizations, and universities. Each year, **NAMT** puts out a call to its members, along with those who have participated in past festivals, asking for submissions. About 100 new musicals are submitted yearly, from which eight are selected by a committee that includes literary managers and artistic directors -- all well-versed in the musical genre.

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The works selected may have been produced elsewhere, but they must not have been mounted in New York. A 45-minute snippet of each show is presented twice during the course of the festival in a staged reading without sets, props, or costumes. Actors and directors are either attached to the projects or brought on board with the help of a consulting producer assigned to each show.

Until recently, says Evans, cast size was a consideration for acceptance. Given the economic realities, the prospect of a large-cast show being produced, especially among the organization's members, was slim, so the festival preferred shows with small casts. To some extent, that has changed.

"Now we're hearing from some producers that they want large musicals for their theatres," says Evans. "This year cast sizes run from six to 26."

If Evans has her druthers, in the future the festival "will play an even more significant and ongoing role in following a show through its development -- from us to Broadway and then back to the regional theatres."