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## **NAMT Gives Musicals a Reason to Hope**

By David Finkle

You can't keep a good song down. Not if the auditors are the 700-plus musical mavens who hustled into the New World Stages auditoriums 2, 4 and 5 last month for the National Alliance's 18th annual Festival of New Musicals.

The song that stopped the two-day confab cold was the simultaneously funny and touching "Mrs. Remington." It's plucked from a two-character show called *The Story of My Life*. The ditty, about a hirsute lady teacher of great understanding, was performed with intelligent gusto by Christopher Fitzgerald. Its author is Neil Bartram, and it festoons a musical — with a Brian Hill libretto — about a 30-year friendship.

If past history is any guide, the representatives from houses that present musical comedy across the United States and England hastily scribbled notes about the *Story of My Life* potential. And this show warranted only the brief inclusion in NAMT's Sunday night Songwriters Showcase. Yet, the extended applause it provoked wasn't repeated for any single number in the eight hopeful entries that got a longer 45 minutes to strut their stuff throughout the festival's longer showings.

Along with the recently concluded New York Musical Theatre Festival (NYMF), the NAMT event is considered an important marketplace for new musicals, which have a tough time getting any kind of exposure nowadays. Things are so bad that Sarah Schlesinger, who runs the graduate musical-comedy writing program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, says her faculty explains to matriculating students that they can't expect to make money doing what they're setting out to do — no matter that they will spend \$40,000 to join the NYU program.

Nevertheless, there are prominent mitigating examples. Take *The Drowsy Chaperone*, which was one of the 2004 NAMT shows and in 2006 had not only reached Broadway but won five Tony Awards (and earned 13 nominations). Lending NAMT a shine it's never had before, *Drowsy* probably hit the Great White Way faster than anything else NAMT has tapped.

It now heads a list of other successful tryouts for Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional attention: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin*, *Songs for a New World*, *Summer of '42*, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, *Ruthless!*, and *I Love You Because*, which turned up Off-Broadway in a trice last season. Due shortly is *Princesses*.

While the NAMT festival can be considered a wonderful thing — if not a sure thing — for musical composers, lyricists and librettists, it's also a commendable opportunity for the actors appearing before representatives of most of the country's important presenting houses.

Chris Grady, licensing head at Cameron Mackintosh International and in from London, says actors "absolutely" benefit from NAMT exposure. "If I were a casting director, I'd go to this instead of all the auditions," he says. Tina McPhearson, vice president for programming at Dayton's Victoria Theatre, describes the NAMT audience as "the cream of the crop."

Perhaps the best arguments for actors on the musical comedy track to look into future festivals are the roster of actors who participated this year. Paid a flat \$100 salary for what Equity limits to 20 hours of rehearsal, the performers include Marc Kudisch, Brian D'Arcy James, Douglas Sills, Lillias White, Darius de Haas, Michael Winther, Dee Hoty, Gregg Edelman, Stephen DeRosa, Jenn Harris, Megan Lawrence, Kerry Butler, Adam Heller, James Judy, Sebastian Arcelus, Megan Hilty, Sarah Stiles, and Leslie Kritzer, who was so enthusiastic she did two shows.