

Thursday, October 24, 2007

Musical Theatre Reps Vote with Their Feet

NAMT festival inspires some to stand up and take notice.

By David Finkle



Standing ovations are a dime a dozen these days. So the fact that the audience leaped to its feet for the second showing of *The Break Up Notebook: The Lesbian Musical* at an annual festival for new work in early October may not be all that meaningful.

On the other hand, maybe it is. The two-act story — by book writer Patricia Cotter and songwriter Lori Scarlett (with additional music by David Manning) — played to representatives from theatres from as far away as Denmark at the Festival for New Musicals, a yearly event presented for the past two decades by the National Alliance for Musical Theatre. These folks had already been exposed to 45-minute tastes of seven musicals, among them the Neil

Bartram-Brian Hill two-hander *The Story of My Life*, which also brought attendees to their feet. So spectators for *The Break Up* might have been expected to sit listlessly through anything that wasn't truly inspiring.

But inspired they were, and the day after the event Cotter was able to say, "Honestly, I don't think it could have gone better." The author, who originally wrote the piece as a play without music, has worked on it through productions at the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center and Los Angeles' Hudson Theatre, where it earned several awards.

Cotter added that having seen the somewhat trimmed version of her first act, she is pleased with where things stand. "The changes we've made [previously] have stuck," she said. "There wasn't any glaring thing I was dying to fix."

She was also more than pleased with the responses she received from people who help decide whether a musical gets a full production. Cotter acknowledged their concern about making money from what they present and was happy to report that they thought *The Break Up Notebook* has potential. Producer Rose Marcario told Back Stage that she received genuine interest "from regional and Broadway producers." For now, there is a production scheduled for February at Cleveland's Beck Center.

Neither Cotter nor Marcario are overly concerned with the potential for resistance to a play about a lesbian named Helen Hill who is trying to recover from her last girlfriend's sudden departure. Cotter calls the musical "a universal show" — a perspective confirmed by audiences leaving the presentation and

reassuring each other that "everybody's been through a breakup." For that reason she believes that songs that pertain more specifically to lesbian affairs will connect with all audiences (including the one that declares "I've never danced with a girl before").

NAMT executive director Kathy Evans was also enthusiastic about *The Break Up Notebook*, as well as the entire program. The other musicals included *Casey at the Bat* by Tom Child and Gordon Goodwin, *The Chocolate Tree* by Marshall Paillet and A. D. Penedo, *The Gypsy King* by Randy Rogel and Kirby Ward, *Kingdom* by Aaron Jafferis and Ian Williams, *Tinyard Hill* by Mark Allen and Thomas M. Newman, and *Writing Arthur* by David Austin.

Evans reported that "every show had a champion," which bodes well for the repercussions from the kind of busy weekend that three years ago yielded *The Drowsy Chaperone* and, prior to that, introduced *Striking 12*, which was produced Off-Broadway last year and was well received.

Evans agreed that this year's frame was especially interesting for having no well-known participating creators; all of them were chosen by a committee unaware of who had written what. Overall, the festival was "very successful," she said. "There was a tremendous turnout and feedback." As evidence, Evans said 40 to 50 of the musical theatre producing community gathered to talk about the festival the day after it closed. Just as some of the work brought the attendees to their feet, some of the pieces made them want to stick around.