

'Vanities' the musical is a friendship revisited

Jack Heifner's story of three women coming of age in the 1960s and '70s gets another look, a fourth scene and some fresh perspective at the Pasadena Playhouse.

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WHEN "Vanities" opened off-Broadway in 1976, no one thought of it as feminist theater. But in its day, the play was groundbreaking.

Jack Heifner's story about three Texas cheerleaders and how they grew apart was one of the first long-running, widely produced plays of the 1970s to feature an all-female cast. "It was very controversial at the time," says the playwright, sitting in the library of the Pasadena Playhouse, during a break from rehearsals for the musical version of his best-known work. "It's hard for people to believe that now, how upsetting the play was."

The feminist motto "The personal is political" was nowhere near the hearts and minds of the "Vanities" gals. Neither were world events. "Vanities" begins on the day of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, but Mary, Joanne and Kathy could not care less. "Most people at the time were writing about how horrible war was, about Vietnam," says Heifner, "and I wrote a play about three people who didn't give a damn."

"Vanities: A New Musical" by Heifner based on his play, with lyrics and music by David Kirshenbaum, opens Friday at the Pasadena Playhouse. The production is directed by Judith Ivey.

Plans have been announced to take the show to Broadway. Producers are eyeing a winter or spring opening at a to-be-determined Shubert theater.

Should everything fall into place and a bankable cast be secured, they're hoping that what Heifner describes as "the right play at the right time" for 1976 will become the right musical for 2009. It remains to be seen whether the piece will make the leap with the facility of a teenage pom-pom girl.

The feminist theater movement emerged in the early 1970s, spurred and inspired by the then-burgeoning women's movement. In 1972, Rosalyn Drexler, Maria Irene Fornes, Julie Bovasso, Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens and Adrienne Kennedy formed the Women's Theater Council, a group dedicated to developing and producing the work of female theater artists. Around the same time, a number of influential feminist theater companies was founded: At the Foot of the Mountain, It's Alright to Be a Woman Theatre, Omaha Magic Theatre, Spiderwoman Theatre and others.

"Vanities" tells the story of three young Texas women, beginning when they are high school cheerleaders, then college sorority sisters, and later as grown women who no longer have much in common. Although the play was not part of the feminist theater movement, it served a theme of the movement: showing women an image of themselves onstage.

But when it came to staging the piece off-Broadway, there was reticence. "Producers didn't think that three women could carry a play," says Heifner. Yet carry it they did, for five years off-Broadway and through many regional productions in the 1970s.

A play about three women hardly seems shocking now. But this was before Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Jane Martin, Paula Vogel and so many others made their mark on the commercial stage.

"I was attacked because I was a man writing about women," Heifner says. "But if Wendy Wasserstein had come before me instead of after, I probably would never have written it."

Debate over traditional gender roles and feminism provided an unseen backdrop to "Vanities." "Women were fighting like crazy over choice," Heifner recalls. "You can't be a wife and a businesswoman, you have to be one or the other, and all that."

These conflicts weren't the subject of the play, but they may have been on the minds of the women who went to see it. "We didn't sit around and say, 'Oh, this is a play about liberating women,' because we were in the midst of it," recalls director Ivey. "I don't think we had that perspective. But it was a departure in that you had this story that ended on the demise of the friendship. Everything wasn't tied up in a little bow.

"It was different to realize that three women could stop being friends," continues Ivey, best known as a veteran actress. "It was more truthful than a lot of other plays. The reality is you don't necessarily stay friends."

Rooted in real life

WRITTEN IN 1975 when Heifner was 28, "Vanities" was inspired by three women the playwright knew. "I thought I was making a statement about the society I was raised in, about people being given the wrong set of values for life, which could be men or women," he says. "I was very cynical at that time."

Heifner went on to write more plays and to work on the books of a number of musicals, although this is the first time he has adapted one of his plays into a musical. "I had resisted all these years making 'Vanities' into a musical," he says. "I didn't want it to turn into 'Grease' or something. People wanted to add a lot more characters and all the boyfriends."

However, his feelings began to change when the play's 25th anniversary came and went. "I had thought at the 25th anniversary of the play that there would probably be a revival in New York, and that fell apart producer-wise," he explains. "So what we actually ended up doing for the 25th-anniversary celebration was to do it here in L.A., as a benefit" at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center.

And so, when the 30th anniversary began to loom, Heifner became more open to the notion of turning "Vanities" into a musical. A friend put him together with composer Kirshenbaum, whose best-known credit is the off-Broadway musical "Summer of '42."

The musical version of "Vanities" was showcased at the 2006 National Alliance for Musical Theatre Festival of New Musicals in New York and had its first production at TheatreWorks in Palo Alto that same year. Also in 2006, plans were announced to take the show to Broadway, but those plans fell through. In spring of last year, the musical was again announced for Broadway, this time for a spring 2008 date -- but that didn't pan out either.

Pasadena artistic director Sheldon Epps first came in contact with the piece at the festival in New York. "A musical based on Jack's play struck me as a genuinely clever and commercial idea," he says. "In fact, I was looking forward to actually seeing it in a New York production" -- a production that did not end up happening.

Eventually, producers gave him a call. "About a year ago, Randy Adams, one of the producers involved, contacted me," says Epps. "He said that for various reasons the production had been delayed and they were looking for a good regional house prior to mounting it on Broadway."

Heifner's long-standing reluctance to turn "Vanities" into a musical was based in part on the jobs he'd had rewriting other people's musicals. "My experience of musicals has not been a lot of fun," he admits. "I've tended to think that there are too many cooks on a musical. What I love about playwriting is that it's usually just the playwright and the director, and you own it and you can pretty much control its destiny. That's not true on a musical."

Indeed, two-thirds of his original play is gone, although parts have been transformed into lyrics. "Just in terms of dialogue, I've given up a lot -- funny things, character development," says Heifner. "But then there was also the opportunity to add some things."

The most significant addition is a fourth scene that portrays the three characters at age 44. "In the musical, you see how they survive," says Ivey. "In that sense, the musical is quite different because it's celebrating friendships, where the play is really about the demise of a friendship."

It has also created a challenge for the cast, whose characters must age from 18 to 44. According to Ivey, the current cast ranges from early 20s to early 30s -- which makes it more difficult than it might be, had the decision been made to cast slightly older actresses who have more to draw upon.

"These actresses are so young playing it now," says Heifner. "I mean, the other day one of them turned to me and said, 'What's a pillbox hat?' And you go, 'Oh, my God, it's history to them,' and they don't even know what happened!"

The creative team is trying to fill in those gaps. However, if the play was apolitical in its time, it is even more so now. What little bite the play's final act may have had has been changed to a more conventional musical ending.

"I found out that my message for the '70s is not my message for now," says Heifner. "I've lived the journey now, and I believe that friendships do last. It's not going to be controversial anymore, that's for sure."