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I Wish to Go to the Festival

By: **Peter Filichia**

They're really doing it. I wasn't 100% certain they could. Oh, I knew they meant well, but the idea of two 30-year olds raising \$450,000 to do a midtown musical theater festival seemed overly daunting to me. We're lucky that the prospect didn't seem nearly as intimidating to Kris Stewart and Elizabeth Lucas.

When I met them in June and heard their grandiose plans, I immensely liked them, their spirit, and their intelligence. I just hoped that all their dreams could come true, but I couldn't help remembering someone else I knew with deeper pockets who told me in 1998 that he'd hold a midtown musical theater festival in 1999. When I saw him in 1999, he said it had been postponed to 2000. And when I saw him in 2000 and asked what was new, he said, "Hey, I'm healthy, and I'm living in the greatest country in the world." You get the point.

And while I guess it's still possible that the **New York Musical Theatre Festival** won't actually occur between Sept. 13 and Oct. 3, every day we do get closer, and every day the announcements pour in. So it looks as if Stewart, the festival's executive director, and Lucas, who's on the programming committee and has coordinated the musical movie screening series, are going to succeed. Not bad for people who didn't even know each other two years ago, until they met at a networking event and bonded over their love of musicals.

Stewart is Australian. "The first musical I saw," he said, "was the first one I directed -- *Merrily We Roll Along*." (I was tempted to say that like the show, he was approaching the art form backwards, but I let it go.) After that, he did productions of *Assassins*, *A Little Night Music*, *Into the Woods*, and *Company* -- do we see a pattern of excellence here? -- he decided to come to America. "I'm sorry to say," he said, "musical theater in Australia is about as appreciated as ice hockey is in New Zealand -- meaning not very much."

Lucas is an Indiana native and Northwestern graduate. At the university, she directed *Nine*, her favorite musical, and not just because she's crazy about Maury Yeston's score. For while many a man says he can relate to Guido, Lucas says she can, too. Not because of his incessant womanizing. "No, I understand the child who doesn't want to grow up, and is career-obsessed, for when I'm working, the rest of my life goes to hell -- which is fine," she added convincingly. "I'm happiest and at my best when I'm directing."

Last September, the two organized a round table where such organizations as Manhattan Theatre Club Playwrights Horizons, and the York Theatre Company attended. "So did the Genesius Guild and Raw Impressions," said Lucas, "two organizations a little too below the theatrical radar for my taste." Added Stewart, "We said, 'In a year, we're going to do a festival, and we're going to do something good. We're going to show how diverse this city is in musical theater.'"

Pretty strong words for this era of musicals based on musical movies, songbook shows, parody shows, and revivals. But Stewart and Lucas got former Paper Mill and Madison Square Garden honcho Geoff Cohen to be their executive producer, and then put out their nets to find plenty of musicals where -- surprise! -- original scores and books (and a few adaptations) abounded.

"We had 221 musicals submitted from 42 states





Jeff Marx and Robert Lopez
(Photo © Michael Portantiere)

and 11 countries," said Stewart, with understandable pride. "We whittled them down to 54, then 36, and then went to people like Kathleer Marshall, Scott Schwartz, and Jeff and Bobby to get their opinions." (Isn't it something, by the way, how "Jeff and Bobby" have already become an idiom in musical theater? But that's what *Avenue Q* can do for you.)

"I was surprised when we got down to 54 musicals and I liked them all so much," said Lucas. As of now, there will be a ton of, virtually all productions and at few readings at 19 different venues, featuring 31 premiering musicals, 14 concerts, 28 performances, and almost 1,000 performers and musicians working on them. Best of all, most events will be offered between 37th and 54th Streets. "We wanted to be in midtown, where the producers are, so they can find these shows easily," said Stewart. So no excuses from any

impresario that he *TRIED* to get to a show, but he just couldn't find the Henry Street Settlement.

So we'll have semi-familiar names (Jeffrey Lodin wrote the music for *A Hundred Years into the Heart*) and very familiar names -- like Stephen Schwartz, whose *Captain Louie* tells about a kid who's moved to a new neighborhood and is a little ill at ease about going trick-or-treating on Halloween. This is not to be confused with a very different Halloween musical, *The Chromium Hook*, where two teens claim that a crazed killer is raving their neighborhood. Some have been produced with success in other cities (including the felicitously titled *The Big Voice: God or Merman?*). Some shows I've admired in readings are getting another look, such as Barbara Campbell and Gary Schocker's *Far from the Maddening Crowd*, and Peter Gootkind's *Ducks and Lovers*. Terrific composer Neil Berg has two shows here: *The Man Who Would Be King* and *Tim and Scrooge*. Patricia Birch is directing *Emma* (based on Jane Austen), Jim and Bob Walton take a look at middle-age in their *The Eyes Are the First Thing to Go*, and Christiane Noll has the Barbara Stanwyck role in *Meet John Doe*. There'll be seminars, master classes, forums, and Jim Caruso's Cast Party -- a networking event where the next Kris Stewart and Elizabeth Lucas may very well meet.

But the centerpiece of the festival is *Like You Like It*, the musical that the powers-that-be judged to be the most worthy of its New Voices Prize, thus securing it a full production. I thought this update of the Bard's *As You Like It* -- book and lyrics by Sammy Buck, music by Daniel S. Acquisto -- was marvelous when I saw it some time ago, so I'm sure looking forward to it now. The forest of Arden is now The Arden Mall. Rosalind is an academic achiever who lusts for varsity wrestler Orlando, but she doesn't have the nerve to ask him out. Rosalind disguises herself as a fraternity brother -- and, well that's just the start. I also love a character named Audrey Shepherd.

Said Stewart, "I believe something Kevin McCollum (co-producer of *Rent* and *Avenue Q*) said: 'I only want to produce things that look like they won't work -- because if you think you're doing something safe, you're going to be 10 years behind the curve -- for by the time you get it up, everything's moved on.' He's right. You'd better do something people aren't quite ready for, because by the time you get it to the stage, they will be ready for it."

When Lucas told me she was doing a Movie Musicals Series, my eyes glazed over, for I expected her to gurgle with excitement as she told me that she'd be showing *Singin' in the Rain* and *West Side Story* where her Big Drawing Card would be that we could again see them on big screens. Hardly. Lucas has much more vision than I. She's featuring the works of new directors, including herself, and her 16-minute short musical, *Isabella Rico*, about a woman and her bridegroom who really meant it when he said he'd give up the drug business once they were married. But on their wedding day, he's assassinated, and now she's inherited his business.

"I was interested in doing movie musicals before *Chicago*," Lucas insisted. "Even before *Moulin Rouge*. So have a lot of other people." They'll be featured, too, in such works as *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, *Deliverance: The Musical*, and *Fairies*. And for those who did miss big screen airings of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Broadway: The Golden Age*, they'll be here, too. The films will all be in midtown, too, at the AMC Theatres Empire 25, on 234 West 42nd Street.



Kevin McCollum

Tickets will be \$10 for movies. \$19 for stage musicals. "We're going to get these works in front of

audiences that wouldn't typically come because of the price barrier, because they don't know how to buy a ticket, because they don't think it's for them," says Lucas. And this time I'm not going to doubt her.

[To contact Peter Filichia directly, e-mail him at pfilichia@theatermania.com]



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