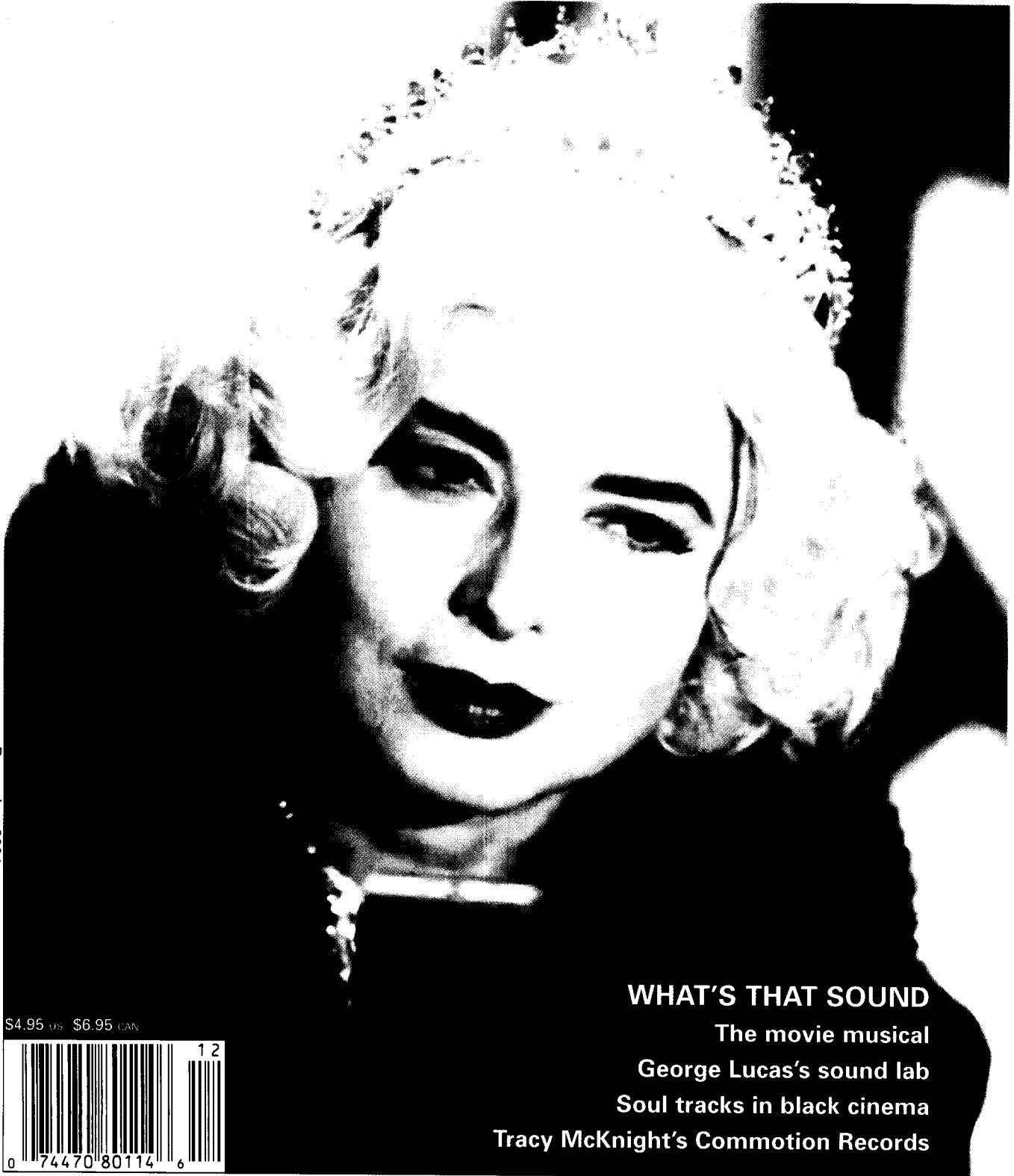


THE independent

FILM AND VIDEO MONTHLY



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WHAT'S THAT SOUND

The movie musical

George Lucas's sound lab

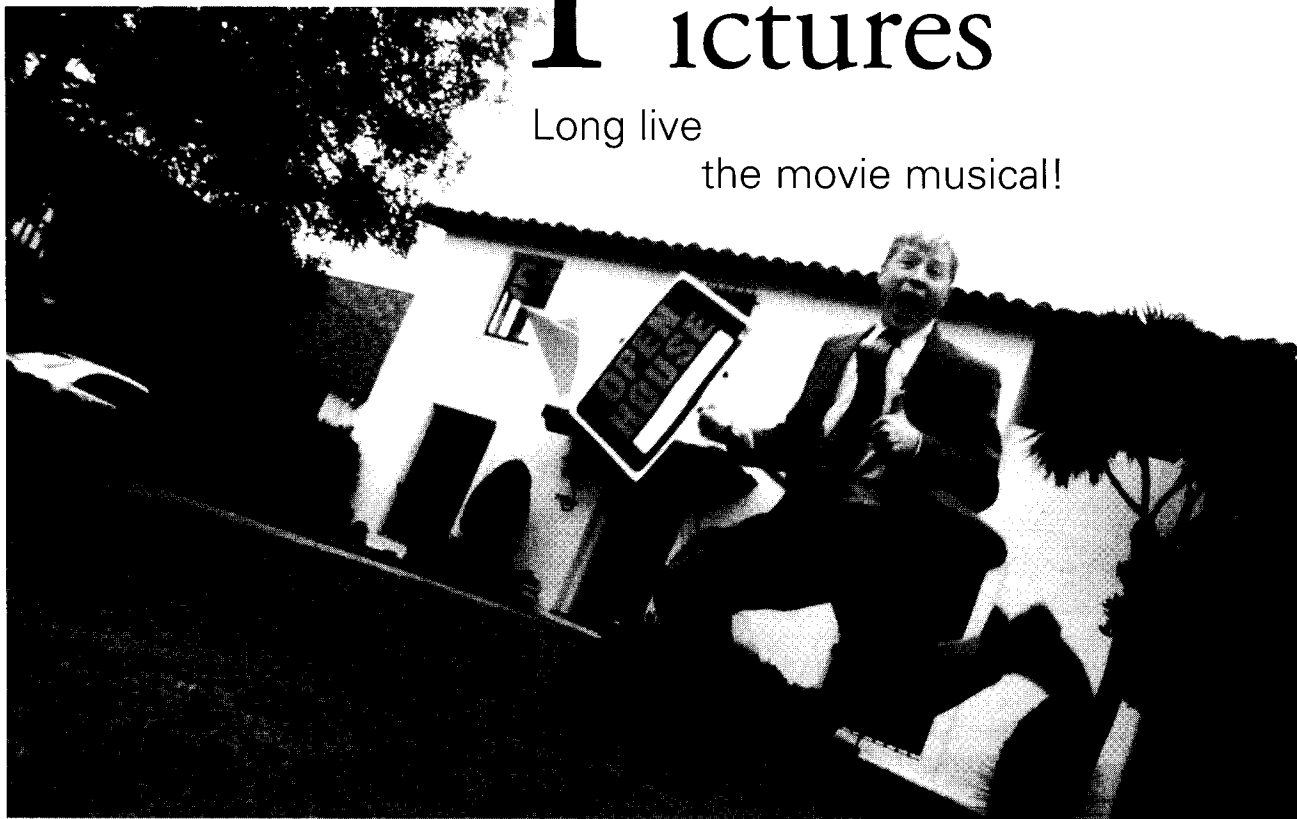
Soul tracks in black cinema

Tracy McKnight's Commotion Records

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Singing Pictures

Long live
the movie musical!



Anthony Rapp celebrates a sale in *Open House* (Dan Mirvish)

BY LISA SELIN DAVIS

Movie musicals are not dead. They didn't die in the 1930s. Television didn't kill them. And expensive 1970s flops didn't knock them out, either. They may have been hibernating or relegated to children's animated films, but the musical keeps coming back, to haunt or to thrill, depending on your attitude.

Some say Miramax's *Chicago* (2002) returned musicals to the hearts of moviegoers, but the 21st century produced a number of independent musicals that put the genre back on the map before Richard Gere studied tap dance and Renee Zellweger learned to croon. In fact, for independent filmmakers, the musical might just be the next big thing.

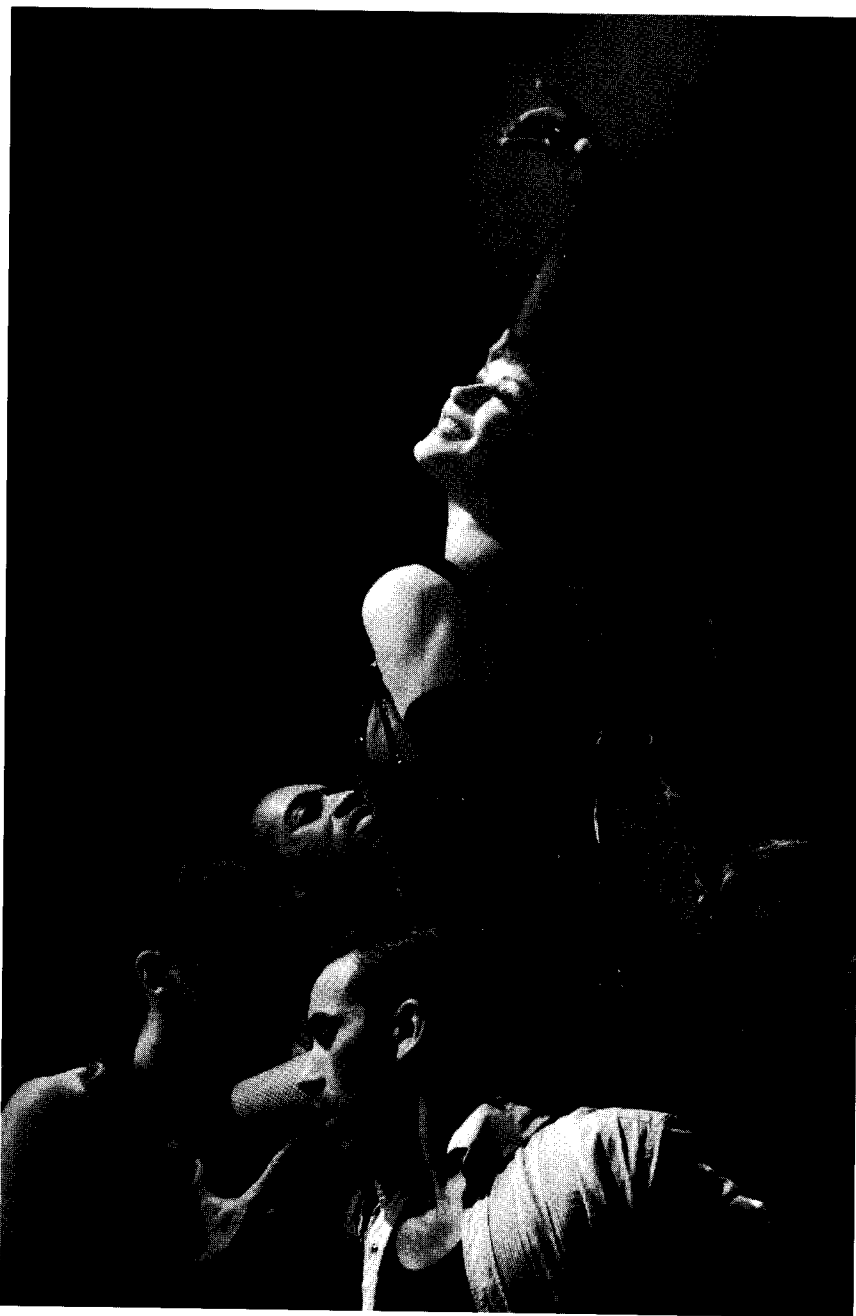
Even silent films were musical, with live piano accompaniment at the least or full-blown orchestras in larger theaters, and big studio films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) were distributed with their own scores. In 1926, Warner Bros. perfected the Vitaphone, which synched phonographic recordings with film frames and made the first musical, *Don Juan*, an opera-style film with no dialogue. It proved such a hit that they flooded the market with these sorts of all-singing-and-no-talking pictures, so much so that audiences began to veer away. One hundred

musicals were produced in 1930, followed by only fourteen the next year: the first big death of musicals.

Busby Berkeley revived them again in 1933 with *42nd Street*, combining song, dance and spoken word, and musicals continued strong throughout World War II. But in the 1950s, the popularity of television stole audiences away. Then the federal government brought anti-trust suits against studios, forcing them to sell off theaters and cut their musical divisions to maintain profits: the second death. The musical morphed into the syrupy sweet Technicolor dream worlds of *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *South Pacific* (1958), perfect for postwar America.

In 1965, *The Sound of Music*, adapted from the stage, racked up five Academy Awards, including best picture, beginning a run of adapted-from-the-stage musicals. In 1968, another stage-to-screen adaptation, *Oliver!*, became the eighth musical to win Best Picture—and the last until 2002's *Chicago*.

The 1970s saw a series of duds that constituted the third death of musicals. Lavish productions like *Mame* (1974) and *Lost Horizon*



Catherine Zeta-Jones and male cast members in Rob Marshall's *Chicago* (David James)

(1973) sunk millions for studios, though a few rock and roll successes like *Grease* (1978) and *Hair* (1979) kept them limping along.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Disney revived the musical, beginning with 1989's *The Little Mermaid* and continuing through 1996's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. These were animated versions of the bright and lavish 1950s musical, digestible primarily to children.

And then, at the end of the decade, a few musicals hit the screen that resembled nothing else that had come before. *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (1999) had its mischievous juvenile characters bursting into song 1950s-style. In the new millennium, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*'s unlikely hero/ine sang a polished rock score, and Eminem made his hip-hop musical debut in *8 Mile* (2002). We saw

VH-1's hip-opera *Carmen* with Beyoncé Knowles, cult musicals like *The American Astronaut* (2001), Neil Young's *Greendale* (2003), and Lars von Trier's anti-musical *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). There may not be a full-on renaissance but clearly, independents are embracing the form.

A musical is a very particular animal, defined by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as a film containing "not fewer than five original songs by the same writer or team of writers either used as voice-overs or visually performed. Each of these songs must be substantively rendered, clearly audible, intelligible, and must further the storyline." An arbitrary group of songs unessential to

the storyline, they say, does not a musical make.

Characters can't just be singing—they have to be singing the story. And there are two basic ways to do that. Films may incorporate an explanatory device for the musical numbers, or they may unabashedly burst into song. In *Chicago*, for instance, the characters have active fantasy lives in which the singing and dancing occur. Hedwig is a performer, telling the story of his/her botched sex-change operation in concert.

Dan Mirvish, a filmmaker and co-founder of the Slamdance Film Festival, says his new film, *Open House* “is definitely the kind where people just burst into song. It's a slightly altered reality where people just sing a lot.” He had been trying to get the film off the ground for months as a straight comedy. “I took it around to independent companies, and they said it didn't have an indie-enough hook to it,” he says. “There were no lesbian vampires or anything like that.” Studios rejected the story as too small. “The idea literally came to me at four in the morning: Let's turn it into a musical.”

The key, says Mirvish, is not to reinvent studio pictures but to find a way to draw attention to your smaller film. “You have to have some kind of reason for critics or festival directors to pay attention—lesbian necrophiliacs, S&M, heroin addicted pedophiles—you got to have something,” he says. As a musical, *Open House* made it to the Hamptons International and Austin film festivals. As a straight comedy, it couldn't even get financed.

Another advantage of musicals: actors want to make them. “Most actors love to sing,” he says. “If you have a musical, you have a better chance of attracting higher caliber actors if you're not going to pay them much.” *Open House* stars Sally Kellerman and Kellie Martin, who sang live during filming. “And all done for the price of Catherine Zeta-Jones's cellphone bill on *Chicago*,” Mirvish says.

Guy Maddin's 2003 quasi-musical *The Saddest Music in the World* was made for about \$2 million. A lover of Busby Berkeley 1930s musicals, Maddin wanted to make something that blended music into action. He says, “I'd have them sort of subliminally sing a syllable and get up the courage every now and then to do a full song.” For Maddin, the musical aspect didn't add to the budget. “Had this not been a musical I still would have needed a score and I still would have had an orchestra in the studio,” he says.

Music was not a hook for Maddin, but an emotional motif. He set Jerome Kern's “The Song Is You” in several styles, from a dirge to a fox-trot, changing the meaning like a literary trope. “Music is more powerful when it makes numerous appearances, when it was producing one set of emotions in the earlier context and producing the opposite in its final context,” Maddin says, adding that music is both a way to draw attention to the film experience, and a way to express deep emotion without dialogue. “When your heart is engaged with another heart, it's really singing.”

Inspired by von Trier's method of choreographing *Dancer in the Dark* (von Trier set up 100 cameras to randomly record the dancing and singing scenes) Maddin had three crew members case the set with Super8 cameras. “We cut it together like an old ransom note,” he says.

Both Mirvish and Maddin had trepidation about making musicals. Neither has formal musical training, and they're well aware that “musi-

cal” is still a dirty word as studios are still afraid of audience aversion to the genre. Early trailers for *Chicago* didn't advertise it as a musical, and the previews for the forthcoming *The Phantom of the Opera* include no singing. But Mirvish has found that people like musicals even when they think they don't. “We've shown it at enough festivals now that I know that the audience will say, ‘I don't really like musicals but I really like your film,’” he says. “It really does work for people that aren't into the musical theatre.”

Maddin's method of recording the musical numbers—a patchwork of close-ups and quick cuts in a newsy style—made it easier for audiences to accept. “It was the perfect hybrid between cinema verité and choreography,” he says. “It's easier to swallow for people who can't accept sudden outbursts into song, who demand realism even though there's no such thing in movies.”

Many filmgoers fear what they think of as the standard 1950s musical, the hysterical musical outbursts punctuating melodramatic storylines. “Even I have a strong resistance to 1950s musicals. There's too much brashness, the colors are too harsh,” Maddin says. He calls those musicals festive football matches. “I wanted my movie to have sort of darker feelings and a sort of darker aftertaste.”

Today's audiences are more likely to embrace that kind of complexity—the juxtaposition of blissful singing with dark subject matter—in part because MTV prepared them for strange pairings of music and images and changed their expectations. “MTV has had a tremendous effect on film musicals,” says John Kenrick, author of the website Musicals101.com “The days of the four- or five-minute long take of one camera shot of Astaire and Rogers step by step working their way through a number—those have passed. In the age of MTV, we have to have as many quick cuts as possible.”

“We grew up with media saturation and channel surfing,” says Elizabeth Lucas, who recently curated a program of new musical films for the New York Musical Theater Festival. “It's not just the influence of MTV with jump cuts, it's also the fact that Disney animated features were huge when I was growing up.” Lucas says television musical episodes of “The Simpsons,” “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” and “Ally McBeal” have opened the gate for musical movie appreciation. “We're not accustomed to linear storytelling,” she says.

The anti-realism of musicals can be difficult to digest for those who crave a seamless entry into the fantasyland of film, but Maddin prefers movies that call attention to themselves, the self-reflection of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) or even David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). “I like being constantly reminded that I'm watching a film,” he says. “You know you're looking at a painting or listening to a song.” Maddin thinks audiences are not only ready for new film experiences they're hungry for them. “We've opened up the borders of films, not always in musical ways, but in different ways that get into the hearts of viewers,” he says, citing the success of Charlie Kaufman scripts. “People are actually looking for alternatives to the slickest and most earth-bound stories.”

Musicals today explode the traditional melodramatic storylines. We've got Hedwig's traumatic transvestite tale, the blind single mother of *Dancer in the Dark*, Cole Porter's bi-sexuality in *De-Lovely* (2004). If this is the next golden age of musicals, the gold is slightly tarnished,

reflecting our fragmented feelings as Americans during tough times.

The first two musical golden ages occurred during periods of great hardship: the Great Depression and after World War II. Perhaps the ongoing war on terror and nuclear proliferation struggles within the so-called "axis of evil" contribute to our re-acceptance of the musical form. "In times of crisis in American history, America loves to sing," says Mirvish.

"Post World War II musicals were idealistic. *Oklahoma!* took place in this never-never land of the Midwest, a land that never really existed," says Kenrick. "This [war on terror] is a different kind of war. We don't know what we're fighting for." But America's divided agenda is a boon for modern independent musicals that present a disjointed world, an eerie dislocation that touches audiences lost in confusion.

This year, at least five musicals will reach theatrical audiences. Besides *Open House*, *Greendale*, and *Phantom*, there's the French musical *Les Choristes*, and Miramax will release the first Hollywood/Bollywood musical merger with *Bride and Prejudice* (this month). Mirvish hopes these five films will sway the Association of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to breath life into the so-far dormant Best Original Musical category. There are Oscars for Best Song and Best Score, but not for Best Musical Film. The category is listed in the Oscars rules as long as five musicals are theatrically released, with at least a one-week run, in a given year. This is the first year since the 1960s that enough films could fit the bill.

A Best Musical category means independents have a greater chance at winning—with fewer competitors—and at getting noticed. "There's nothing like an Oscar nomination to get distributors interested in your

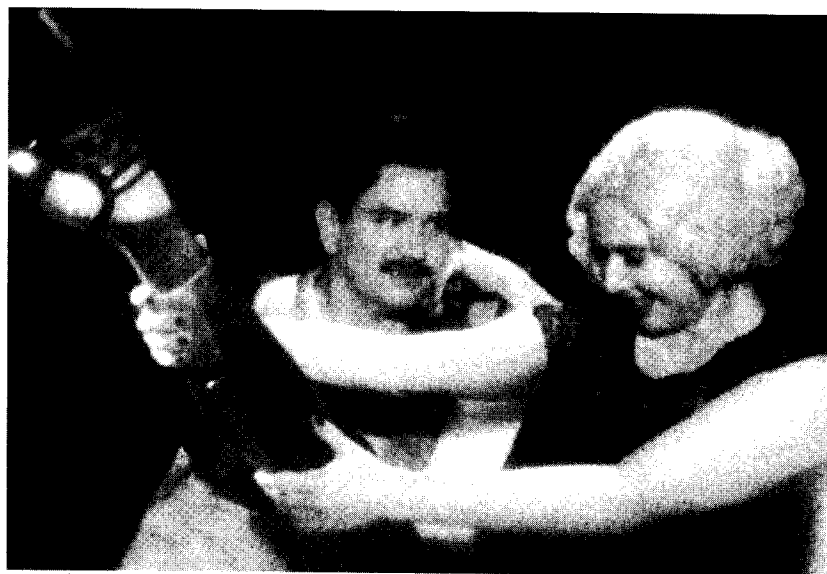
film," Mirvish says. And lobbying for musicals would prove much easier than lobbying for comedies or dramas, with only 276 members of the Academy's musical branch. "That's only 276 flyers to print." The Academy had no comment for this story, but Mirvish thinks their reluctance may have something to do with not wanting to extend the already lengthy awards show.

Whatever happens with the musical in the future, John Kenrick says they must all have heart, courage, and brains—the *Wizard of Oz* formula for a good film. "It's up to independent producers to bring any kind of hope in the future," he says.

But studios will venture into musicals, as well. There will be musicals adapted from screen to stage and back again, as John Waters's *Hairspray* is re-translated from Broadway and Mel Brooks reworks *The Producers* back into a film. More re-adaptations of Broadway successes will hit the big screen like *Urinetown*, to be produced by Killer Films. It could be the beginning of the next golden age...or it could be the end of a brief resurgence of the form. Filmmakers and producers will be looking to see if any musical can repeat *Chicago's* brilliant performance both at the box office and with the critics. "What *Phantom of the Opera* will do this Christmas remains to be seen," Kenrick says. "It could put the nail back in the coffin."

But Lucas is more optimistic. "We're only beginning to explore what the form can do," she says.

For now, the musical movie still lives, if quietly, breathing shallowly at the edges of both studio and independent cinema. "You can keep throwing into the grave," Kenrick says, "where the Dracula of show business will keep rising up once you give it fresh blood." ★



***The Saddest Music in the World* is "the perfect hybrid between cinema verite and choreography," according to its director, Guy Maddin.**