

### MUSICAL THEATER PROJECTS – 7/19/19

- 1) “The Amateur Sinner,” an amorous and amoral musical fairytale for adults, original book & lyric sketches by the late screenwriter Aubrey Wisberg, revised and adapted with the consent of his estate. Set in a remote corner of French wine country in the late 1920s, the plot concerns a misanthropic, functioning-alcoholic WW1 decorated hero turned vagabond who wanders into a small town in the midst of a forest requiring three days to cross, beyond which Paris lies another three days distant.

Here he encounters a vulgar but wealthy peasant couple who want to marry their still virginal (not for long!) daughter into the local nobility represented by the effete young comte and his impoverished but still proud mother the comtesse. Other principal characters include the sergeant of police, the good “bad” girl, her aunt who owns the bistro, the shy doctor in love with the aunt, a crone who knows everyone’s secrets and a feral youth possessed of a somewhat peculiar, prehensile appendage in his nether regions—a tail like that of a monkey, but apparently hairless—which he puts to good use with most of the women of the town.

- 2) “That Jones Boy! Or, the Adventures of a Bastard,” a musical comedy of manners adapted from the classic mid-18<sup>th</sup> century novel “Tom Jones” by Henry Fielding. This is not merely a sex farce, though it contains elements of both, but rather a bildungsroman and picaresque about a young man seeking his proper place in a highly stratified social structure.

While there was one ballad opera version of the story performed during Fielding’s own lifetime—to which he probably contributed as manager of a theater company—as well as a subsequent English version with music by Arne and a French opera, this is reset in the last decade of the century—the Age of Revolution: American, French, Industrial and Romantic—to be performed as it might have been done by the resident company of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane under the management of their matinee idol leading man, Philip Kemble.

- 3) “The New Gospel According to Jack Cooter,” a musical parable of the Redneck Messiah based on a concept and material by Jack Shirley. The major events of the New Testament are reset in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century American Bible Belt and center on a good ol’ boy who is not only a carpenter but electrician, plumber and general contractor.

Not only is he married to a waitress at the Upper Room Bar & Grill, but they have a small, smart-mouthed daughter and are expecting their second child, his disciples are also good ol’ boys and his mother is known as the Virgin Myrtle. Inspired by a disembodied voice who calls herself Sophie—think Reba or Dolly—he embarks on his doomed ministry which is rewarded with the Rapture.

- 4) “Jack London’s ‘Martin Eden,’” a Ragtime Vaudeville Revue based on my own non-musical adaptation of the semi-autobiographical novel which was presented on two subsequent afternoons 20-odd years ago at Bruno Walter Auditorium under the auspices of SSD&C and the Dramatists’ Guild. Like London, his protagonist pulls himself up by his own bootstraps at the turn of the last century, becoming a wealthy and famous (notorious) author, poet and social critic of the Gilded Age.

Leaving behind his former companions on the Barbary Coast—his boxing manager/trainer, the uneducated mill girl who loves him selflessly and the alcoholic/drug-addicted homosexual poet who commits suicide—Martin becomes the darling of the Nob Hill nouveau-riche and engaged to marry the bluestocking daughter of one particularly snobbish family. Eventually he departs

for the South Seas on his yacht and likewise commits suicide, drowning himself on a moonless night by slipping over the railing into oblivion.

- 5) "Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein,'" a steampunk opera or monstrously macabre musical based on three early 19<sup>th</sup> century stage versions—two English, one French—of the Gothic classic about the monster and his maker, whose own family is extremely dysfunctional. His younger siblings all have severe issues, his parents are double first cousins who despise each other—both of them carrying on multiple extramarital affairs—and his maternal grandfather is nutty as the proverbial fruitcake.

Add to these disloyal and self-seeking servants, peasants, townspeople, whores, soldiers and Gypsies, plus Viktor's fiancée and her blind father, and there is no end to the creepy shenanigans, not even when the creature and his creator throttle each other on a mountain precipice. Frankly, "Sweeney Todd" was more than a little inspirational.

- 6) "Shape Shifter," an original, though the kernel of the concept originated in an unfinished musical-within-a-musical for which I wrote book and lyrics in the early 1970s about a young man who joins a carnival. In this version he suffers a rare skin condition—Tinea Versicolor, which is expressed in brown blotches resembling those of a leopard or jaguar—manifesting itself only at puberty, hereditary (though it may skip several generations) and aggravated by heat, humidity and stress, whether physical or emotional.

Escaping his parents' attic, where he has been hidden for a decade, during a fire, he goes on the road—Route 66, in fact, from LA to Chicago—at the height of the Great Depression 1934-1936. He encounters hobos, a childless farm couple, prostitutes, an itinerant preacher, an orphaned boy of 8 or 9, cowboys, miners, oil riggers and a third- or fourth-rate troupe of freaks and geeks, becoming the star attraction of the traveling show and falling in love with the daughter of the owners.

- 7) "Samba de Carnaval'," adapted from Aphra Behn's Restoration Comedy, "The Rover" and reset in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Rio de Janeiro during the three-day pre-Lenten festival. The plot concerns four young(-ish) British Army officers recently seconded from guard duty on St. Helena—a frigid, barren rock in the mid-Atlantic to the seamy, steamy tropics.

Here they re-encounter four young Cariocas whom they previously rescued from ravishment by the French in Lisbon during the Peninsular Campaign: a sharp-witted, sharp-tongued girl fated to join a convent because she has frightened off all potential suitors, her flighty and flirtatious younger sister, their more liberated cousin and an actress-courtesan who would rather support her lover than the other way round. There are masks, disguises, mistaken identities and even some gender confusion before everyone is finally married to the right person.

- 8) "Ekaterina," a musical tale of the Old Russia, adapted from the secret diaries of Catherine the Great, recounted when she is on her deathbed. The plot follows her from her childhood as an obscure minor German princess through her disastrous marriage and usurpation of the imperial throne, pseudonymously translated.

We also encounter her fourteen known lovers—not a horse among them—unless one counts the centaur-like cyclops Potemkin. Performed as it might have been done shortly after the Bolsheviks took power, as object lesson about the abuses of the Romanovs.

- 9) "No Money Down!" a street musical adapted from the original screenplay for the award-winning 2007 indie "Johnny Montana" directed and co-written by—and starring—John Daniel Gavin, one

of my own former acting students. This is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century version of Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress" occurring at the onset of the AIDS/HIV crisis.

Our protagonist is a dyslexic/ADHD-suffering smalltime hustler and pot-pusher from Bensonhurst Brooklyn (at the time the dead-end of all dead-end neighborhoods) who becomes a model and paid escort—to men as well as women—in Manhattan and achieves his dream of purchasing a Harley-Davidson. However he crashes it and burns in the conclusion to his dream/nightmare which frames the plot and awakens in his own bed.

- 10) "Creole Nights," an operette adapted from George Washington Cable's collection of short stories, "Old Creole Days" and novel "The Grandissimes," set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans, which was even then known as the Big Easy, against the background of Aaron Burr's plot to seize the Louisiana Purchase and convert it into his own personal kingdom. A young Federal agent sent by the president to foil that plot becomes embroiled with local politics, racism and miscegenation.

He falls in love with the blonde and blue-eyed octoroon daughter of a naïve but wealthy quadroon woman whose late, unofficial New England merchant husband left her a fortune in trust for their daughter. The girl is pursued by one of Burr's agents as well as by an aged banker who may or may not actually be the notorious pirate Jean Lafitte.

- 11) "Psyche...and Cupid," a mythical musical based on my own children's theater version of the central portion of Lucius Apuleius' Latin novel "The Golden Ass." This is a feminist retelling of the tale of the mortal girl who after a series of trials—basis for "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Princess and the Pea"—wins the hand of the god of love. Though a divinity, he is alternately spoiled and berated by Venus, the archetypal monster-in-law. The goat-legged-and-horned Pan serves as confidant to the heroine in addition to narrating and leading an actual Greek chorus of deities, monsters and mortals.

- 12) "Mother Bombay," a musical romance of the Raj adapted from John Lyly's pseudo-Plautine early 17<sup>th</sup> century comedy "Mother Bombie"—set not in Rome, but in the market town of Rochester—about four couples (not the standard one or two) who as young adults in 1878 find themselves either in love with or engaged to their own siblings. 20 years previously they were most of them switched by their ayah (nanny) the title character, and returned to the wrong parents.

All this is played out against the background of a Russian plot to drive out the British and replace them as masters of the subcontinent. This is a mashup of Bollywood and Gilbert and Sullivan, Gilbert himself having spent part of his childhood in India where his father was a naval surgeon attached to the East India Company.

- 13) "The Wild Goose Chase" an airborne musical comedy adapted from John Fletcher's early 17<sup>th</sup> century comedy of the same name, reset in 1911 England during the run-up to the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary. The eponymous hero is now a pioneering aviator who has thus far avoided all marital snares until he is finally trapped by the flame-haired suffragist sister of his best friend and fellow pilot.

All this is complicated by the husband-hunting daughters of a self-made American millionaire and by German spies who are attempting to nobble the Royal Flying Corps. One of them is based on Mata Hari, who is not merely an exotic dancer but also stars in two mini-operettas, one in each act.

- 14) "Pawn Shop," a musical comedy about urban angst, based on a concept and material by Theodore Weissenborn, my cousin and a former Dallas' police detective, with whom I'm co-writing the book. The plot principally concerns the operator of the eponymous establishment, in his mid-forties, widowed—though the ghost of his wife appears—she and their twin children were killed in an airplane crash several years previously and he has remained single since, though pursued by several women.

He is also half Irish Catholic and half Polish Jewish, raised in both faiths by his now deceased grandfather—Zayda's ghost also appears—from whom he inherited the pawn shop after a series of failed efforts at being a Wall Street broker and an agent of Black Ops. Other principal characters include a hooker with a heart of gold, a novice police detective, members of a real estate conglomerate who want to "re-gentrify" the neighborhood, and a one-legged panhandler.

- 15) "Hexes" adapted from the screenplay for Benjamin Christensen's 1921 Expressionist film "Haxan (The Witch)," a work now in the public domain, based on actual witch trials which took place in Germany in 1486 and recorded in 1488 by two of the Inquisitors who sat in judgment in their textbook/manual "Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of Evildoers)." The trials were conducted not just against suspected sorcerers, the majority of whom of course were innocent, but heretics and those who were involved with incipient Protestantism.

Just as in the McCarthy/HUAC hearings, many of the accused named names in hope of being exonerated, when in fact their confessions led to their own deaths by fire. In this show the same proves to be the case, while the actual witches and devil worshippers escape.

Among those sent to the stake are a senile woman whose skills as a weaver of cloth have long since deserted her and left her indigent. Those she accuses include any who have mistreated her including a young widow with an infant son.

She has had the misfortune of attracting the romantic, though chaste, attentions of a young monk who is going through a crisis of faith due to his involvement in the witch trials. He too is judged guilty and both are on the verge of being burnt when who else should appear as the deus-ex-machina than the Devil himself!

I've also a couple of other projects in mind, but prefer to wait until those listed above are well under way and composers have completed enough of the music that they can be copyrighted. In most instances, the split on the author's advance and all royalties will be 50-50 instead of the Dramatists' Guild standard split of 2/3 to me for book and lyrics and only 1/3 to the composer.

It's my opinion that the music is just as important in conveying plot, character, locale and mood as are the words, no matter what the ratio. Where my libretto is based on/adapted from material copyrighted by a third party, as with a film or novel not yet in the public domain, the split will be one-third to the composer, one-third to the author of the underlying material and one-third to me.

Synopses copyright © 2019 Robert D. Carver