

Theater



IN BLOOMS
Baldwin, Butz and Bobby Steggert (as son Will) make up *Big Fish*'s family.

Edited by
Kris Vire
theater@timeoutchicago.com

Fish tale

Director Susan Stroman hooks us on the Broadway-bound *Big Fish*. By **Kris Vire**

"I remember seeing the movie and crying at the end of it," **Susan Stroman** says of Tim Burton's 2003 film *Big Fish*. "And I don't cry that much at movies. I'm a theater gal."

Stroman, the five-time Tony Award-winning director and choreographer known for work like *The Producers* and *The Scottsboro Boys*, is addressing a crowd of reporters and group-sales reps at a February preview event for the new musical adaptation of *Big Fish*. With a book by John August (who also adapted the screenplay from Daniel Wallace's 1998 novel) and music and lyrics by Andrew Lippa (*The Wild Party*, *The Addams Family*), the show has a five-week tryout at Chicago's Oriental Theatre this spring in advance of a planned October opening on Broadway.

Like the movie and the novel, *Big Fish* the musical concerns Edward Bloom, a Southern traveling salesman and teller of tall tales who's now on his deathbed. Edward's adult son, Will, long skeptical of his father's stories, tries to reconcile their strained relationship. "The thing of course that I most connected with is it's about storytelling," Stroman, 58, says at the preview at Michigan Avenue's Pritzker Military Library. "And for those of us who create for the theater, we are

storytellers. And in the end, this story is about how storytellers never die."

"This is about someone who tells 'big fish' stories, and you're not sure if they're true or if he's exaggerating," Stroman says later, on the phone from New York, where the show is rehearsing.

"Everything about the piece is life-affirming. It's about how important it is to pass on these stories from generation to generation."

Like the film, the musical moves back and forth in time between the ailing, older Edward and his stories of his experiences as a young man. But unlike in Burton's version, which split the role between Albert Finney and Ewan McGregor, Edward is played throughout by 46-year-old Tony winner Norbert Leo Butz.

"That's something you really can't do in movies unless you have lots of prosthetic makeup and tricks," Stroman says. "But in the theater, it's very natural to take on that theatrical

invention. It's a theatrical device that an audience really invests in; it's all done physically. Norbert can be quite heroic and barrel-chested when he's young, and when he's an older man his whole body takes on that persona. It's a wonderful acting treat."

Tony-nominated actor and Northwestern alum Kate Baldwin, 37, who plays Edward's wife, Sandra, effuses about Lippa's score. At the February preview, she and Butz performed a gentle ballad, "Time Stops," depicting Edward and Sandra's love-at-first-sight meeting.

"I've always thought that Andrew

was incredibly smart and had a wonderful pop influence—like, he has a really good sense of what a hook in a song can do and what a groove in a song can do to please your ear and keep you interested in the song," Baldwin says. "And on top of that, he tells a really good story lyrically."

"The music is very romantic because Edward Bloom is a

romantic," Stroman says. "And Andrew, I think, is writing about what he knows because he sees a lot of himself in these characters. It's remarkable work coming out of him—beautiful songs."

Big Fish begins previews Tuesday 2 at the Oriental Theatre. See Touring shows.



Othello: The Remix



Chicago Shakespeare Theater (see Resident companies). Written and dir. by the Q Brothers. With GQ, JQ, Postell Pringle, Jackson Doran. 1hr 30mins; one intermission.

Those who know the Q Brothers from their hip-hop adaptations of Shakespeare's comedies—*The Bomb-itty of Errors* and *Funk It Up About Nothin'*—may wonder what the bros would do when approaching a tragic work like *Othello*. For the most part, GQ and JQ find the funny. The four cast members, dressed in mechanics' jumpsuits that they augment with additional costume pieces to take on multiple characters, address our potential unease in a prologue: "I know what you're thinkin' / 'Hold on just a minute / That's a tragedy' / Yep / But there's a comedy in it."

The Qs and their co-conspirators, Postell Pringle and Jackson Doran (all ably backed by DJ Clayton Stamper), translate the Moor's tale to the modern music industry. Othello (Pringle) is a self-made superstar MC, Desdemona the ethereal voice that provides the hooks for his choruses. Cassio (Doran) is the pretty-boy crew member Othello wants to groom into a star, much to the chagrin of Iago (GQ), who sees himself as the superior rapper.

Though compressed and refreshed, both story and wordplay find rich parallels with the original text. The initially questionable decision to play Emilia and Bianca in broad drag pays off when Doran's doormat of an Emilia turns her fourth-act protofeminist monologue into a hilarious, Blu Cantrell-style R&B revenge ditty. Similarly, the choice to keep Desdemona heard but not seen yields chilling returns in a murder scene that silences the beats—including our hearts.—*Kris Vire*



THE BIG O JQ, left, hypes Pringle.

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