

SELF-STARTER

BY GERARD RAYMOND

> Jim Brochu and Steve Schalchlin Musical Serendipity

"I've always told young actors you have to do something for yourself every single day in this business if you want to get ahead," says actor-playwright Jim Brochu. "You can't wait for the right role to come by. First of all, connect with a very talented composer, which I have had the good fortune to do." The composer in question, Steve Schalchlin, chimes in: "And I've always said that the secret to success in the theatre is marry a great playwright."

Brochu and Schalchlin, a couple for more than two decades, are enjoying the Off-Broadway success of their latest collaboration, an autobiographical musical titled *The Big Voice: God or Merman?* To hear them talk about it—and their previous Off-Broadway hit, *The Last Session*, which grew out of Schalchlin's battle with AIDS—is like getting a master class in self-starting.

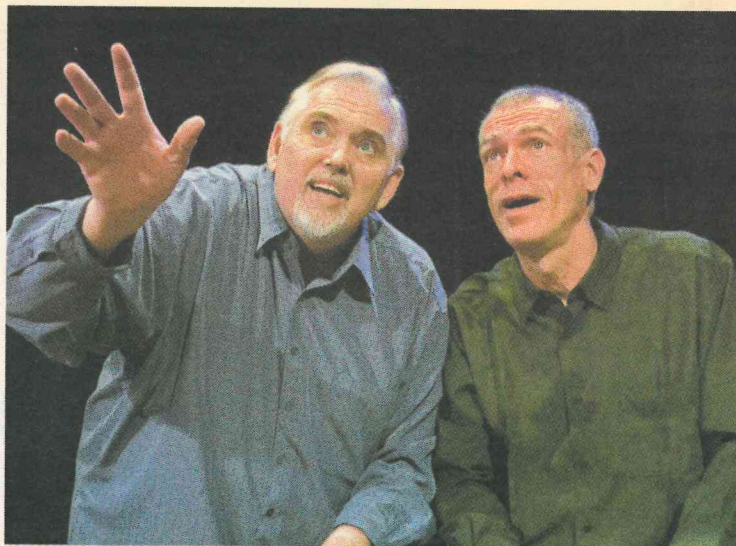
"It all started to come together in 1995, when Steve got very sick and I saw that the creative process was doing for him what drugs couldn't do," says Brochu, recounting the genesis of *The Last Session*. "I started giving him homework assignments: Write a song about the group you went to; write a song about your funeral and call it 'Save Me a Seat.' Finally he had about 10 songs together and he said, 'Okay, what are you going to do? Are these songs going to die with me?' I was stuck because they were self-contained songs. How do they fit into a musical, where songs are supposed to move the plot?"

Then Brochu found the answer: They visited a friend who had a recording studio in his house, and Schalchlin played some of the songs with other musicians present. "The only way I can

describe it is a flash of grace," Brochu says. "I saw the entire show." Within weeks he had written the first draft of the book, about a musician who rediscovers his will to live after recording what he plans will be his final session. Soon after, when ASCAP suggested staging a benefit concert to raise money for Schalchlin's medical expenses, the duo leapt at the opportunity to showcase their new work.

"You have to have the faith and just put it out there," Brochu advises. "I tell you, it becomes like a magnet: It starts to draw people in. You can't just write something—do a reading for 10 people in a living room." Schalchlin adds that one also has to be prepared to rewrite: "I know a lot of young writers who become so emotionally invested in their first draft. They don't realize that it's practically a sketch compared to what you're going to end up with. You take every one of those readings and rewrite it from top to bottom, and do it again, and do it again."

Schalchlin also started to make things happen by using what was then a new medium. "I began an online diary before there were blogs," he recalls. "A friend of mine said that you can get information about AIDS and meet other people through this bulletin board service, and out of desperation, because I couldn't get out of the house, I began using the Internet." Schalchlin also started using the Web to promote *The Last Session*. "I don't assume that somebody else is going to do my promotion. I do whatever I can to get people singing my songs," he says. "We raised funding from the website." One well-wisher, he explains, learned about the musical from the online diary and



Brochu and Schalchlin in *The Big Voice*

offered help financing the show without even being asked.

All this led to workshops and eventually an Off-Broadway production. *The Last Session* was nominated for best musical by both the Drama League and the New York Outer Critics Circle during its successful 1997 run, and the following year it received the awards for best score and best book from the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle.

Germ of the Merm

Cut to the summer of 2002. Brochu and Schalchlin, the latter no longer quite so ailing, are invited to participate in a Monday-night series at Southern California's Laguna Playhouse, where *The Last Session* was a hit. It was supposed to be an informal chat plus a few songs, but the couple had something bigger in mind. "Take advantage of every opportunity," says Schalchlin, who had been working on a set of new songs but again without a book attached. They decided to use the one-night engagement as the launching pad for their next new musical.

"I say we write by the Tom Sawyer method," Schalchlin explains. "I start slapping paint on the fence—writing songs and coming up with ideas—and I just keep on until finally he looks at it and says, 'No, no, no,' and grabs the thing. Then I just sit back and wait for him to finish." This time, it was a collection of songs loosely structured around an abstract concept they referred to as "the God musical." When it was suggested they focus the piece more on themselves, Brochu experienced another "flash of grace": He had been assembling some autobiographical material for a possible nightclub act, but now those stories coalesced around Schalchlin's songs to become *The Big Voice: God or Merman?*

"The story in *The Big Voice* is how we both were raised in church, both very devout," says Schalchlin. "We discovered, as we grew older, as gay men, that our churches didn't really have a place for us. And so we both found our ways into the theatre and began to discover that you can't keep a person's true spirituality down. *The Last Session* is about someone who has lost faith in life and had to recapture the spirit of life again.

ED KRIEGER

Making the choice to live is a daily choice that everybody makes, which is the theme of *The Big Voice*."

The Arkansas-born Schalchlin's first exposure to the theatre world came fairly recently compared to Brochu, a New Yorker who says he got hooked on Ethel Merman at age 13 and performed in his first Off-Broadway play in 1969, by which time he had already seen many of Broadway's legendary performers and shows. "The original productions of *Gypsy*, *Follies*, and *Company*—they run in my head like movies," Brochu says. "When I think back, I could describe to you more experiences that I had in the theatre than I ever had in church." Laughing, he adds, "I mean, 'Gee, I saw a really great Mass the other day?'"

After touring several U.S. cities—and a successful L.A. run that garnered the show an Ovation Award for best musical—*The Big Voice* is currently playing at New York's Actors Temple Theatre, which is also a functioning synagogue. It is the first theatrical production to play the temple, which has served the acting community since 1923. The likes of Joe E. Lewis, Jack Benny, and Sophie Tucker once worshipped there, but recently the synagogue had been experiencing a decline in membership, so its leaders decided to turn it into a theatre on nights when there were no services.

"We took a chance," Schalchlin says. "People didn't want to play there because you can't do shows on Fridays and it's never been a theatre before. We thought, Are you kidding? They're offering us a space, and it's a beautiful space." So *The Big Voice* found a home Off-Broadway, and as good notices began pouring in, the synagogue experienced a small renaissance as well. "It's strange that a musical about a gay marriage between a Baptist and a Catholic has revitalized the synagogue," Brochu says. To which Schalchlin quips, "We also like to say the gays have moved in and cleaned up the neighborhood again."