

WHAT GOES FOR ZAKS

American director Jerry Zaks who is directing *Anything Goes* at the Prince Edward Theatre this month talks to Gerard Raymond



Jerry Zaks

'My credo is E M Forster's 'only connect'. It's the greatest joke in the world — missed connections. It's the hardest thing, connecting, and to watch people desperately trying, to watch them get foiled or their expectations reversed, usually makes us laugh.'

Jerry Zaks who directs *Anything Goes* (which opens July 4 at the Prince Edward starring Elaine Paige, also interviewed in this issue) is an expert at making people laugh. He has a reputation for being one of the best directors of comedy in America. 'The plays I respond to,' he says, 'are those where I recognize the characters are desperately trying to make connections to something, someone or some principle, and it ain't working!'

Three of Zaks' greatest successes have been characterised by this principle of what he calls 'serious silliness': a revival of John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* for the Lincoln Center Theater; *Anything Goes*, which won the Tony award for Best Revival of 1988 and is well into a second successful year at the Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont theatre in New York; and the current Broadway production of Ken Ludwig's *Lend Me a Tenor*, for which Zaks recently received a Tony nomination for Best Director.

Having begun his career in the theatre as an actor (the Broadway productions of *Tintypes* and *Grease*), Zaks says he turned to directing when he found he 'was growing increasingly obnoxious to other actors. It was very difficult for me not to direct them and not to have a third eye operating. I would have fired me if I had been my director'. He caught the attention of critics and audiences with the 1979 off-Broadway production of Christopher Durang's *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All For You*. He has since directed four other plays by Durang, all in the same caustic, absurdist vein.

While he has worked in the musical genre before, *Anything Goes* represents Zaks' first major musical. His approach was to treat it as a play with music. 'I like that approach — to take it just as seriously.' Indeed, Zaks spent ten months working on a new book for the show with writers Timothy Crouse and John Weidman. (Crouse is the son of Russel Crouse, one of the original

bookwriters for the 1934 show, and Weidman is best known for the book of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*.) The unusual length of time spent working with the writers on a musical, and a revival at that, was possible because Zaks is Director-in-residence at Lincoln Center Theatre.

Having been given what is in essence a home at the Lincoln Center (his commitment is to do one play a year for them), Zaks was able to take the writers through many re-writes sifting through the material from the original 1934 book, as well as the book of a 1962 revival of *Anything Goes*. The original production ran a record 420 performances and made Ethel Merman an institution, but its plot, which takes place on board a ship, was in need of revivifying. The new version that Crouse and Weidman devised uses the same characters and basic plot lines as the original but has, as Zaks put it, 'a contemporary sensibility, energy and wit to serve the music for today's audience.'

There was an abundance of songs to chose from as well. The show's musical director Edward Strauss came in very early on the project to help select from among three sets of songs: those used in the 1934 production, those that were cut from it, and those which were used in the 1962 revival. 'Then we tried working out the best placement of the songs to tell the story — the silly, silly story,' remembers Zaks with a laugh. 'That was a tremendous amount of fun, you know, coming up with the notion that a certain song, even though it was sung by one character back in 1934, would be much more effective if some other character sang it at a different spot in this show.'

Zaks does not feel that they have betrayed the spirit of the original with their transpositions and interpolations of the songs. 'No, I think Cole would have been very excited at the notion of Lord Evelyn (Martin Turner), the

Englishman who falls in love with the free-spirited singer Reno Sweeney (Elaine Paige), singing 'The Gypsy in Me'. The song was originally sung by the ingenue Hope (Ashley Sinden) but here — the worm turning — it's a wonderful stroke dramatically.' Similarly, in the original, the song 'Buddie, Beware' was supposed to be sung by Reno, and then cut out. In the current version it is given to Erma (Catherine Evans), the provocative gangster moll who spends her time flirting with the sex-starved sailors on board. This scene — where Erma confronts the sailors and decides to put them wise to her true nature — could have been easily constructed with dialogue, but, says Zaks, 'the fact that you can do it with a song, I think would have tickled Cole.'

Jerry Zaks' production of *Anything Goes* has very strong sexual currents which, he says is 'no accident — absolutely part of the conscious plan.' He explains that other productions of this musical tend to send it up, 'very tongue-in-cheek, often in an attempt to capture 'the style' and become very narcissistic, self-indulgent and very camp.' The 1962 version, which was also quite successful, took what Zaks calls a 'jewel-box approach'. Very early on, Zaks decided that he did not want to take that course. The decision was guided partly by his musical director who demonstrated how the music should sound. 'It was the popular music of the day — it was sexy. He played some swing arrangements of the songs and they were hot.' They decided that the music would be played by an on-stage swing-band. 'It worked, and the notion of the sailors being sexy came from that. Serious stillness means credible silliness. If you've got a bunch of sailors on a ship and this hot number walks on, you are going to believe they are going to go crazy. This informs the production all the way down the line.'

Anything Goes will mark Zaks' debut in London. He was actually scheduled to direct Alain Boublil's and Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Miss Saigon*, which opens in the fall. However Zaks withdrew from the project citing domestic reasons. 'He is not reluctant to talk about the circumstances. 'The more I say this the more I wonder if people really believe me! I know I don't function well when I am away from my family for too long. The work that had to be done was no more complicated or mysterious than what we had to do with the first draft of *Anything Goes*. But given the fact that the designers were all in London and the casting was going to be essentially done worldwide, I was sure it was ultimately for the good. Structure has always been important to me, whether it is as an actor, a director or as a human. I like to have that base, then I can go crazy and

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delicate, poetic dialogue also demand careful handling if to modern ears they are not to appear naff. The play is among those written while Musset was under the influence of his traumatic affair with George Sand, and its battle of the sexes theme clearly reflects this. Vincent's direction goes hand in hand with Jean-Paul Chambas' enchanted design, where a rocky outcrop is all things and a church steeple a mobile and symbolic chess piece. There is a perfect cohesion between the two, which puts Musset's moral message in a surrealistic context that makes it all the more cogent. Vincent also manipulates Musset's prickly, sardonic humour to entertaining effect.

Unlike most of the population of France, who seem unmoved by the event, I can no longer ignore that 1989 is the 200th anniversary of La Révolution. It is an event which has provided the *raison d'être* and the wherewithall for subsidised theatres and companies to storm audiences up and down the country, with whatever they think fitting about a period of history, which, judging by the 'revolutionary' productions I have seen so far, appears to have been a pretty dubious affair. Premiered at the Espace Européen, *Elles étaient citoyennes*, written and directed by Monick Lepeu is based on the true stories of women from different backgrounds and who for different reasons were victims of the Revolution. Lepeu's strongly feminist playlet presents the facts so that they meet their end at the guillotine for wanting the very things that the revolution was supposed to be about — liberty, equality, and fraternity. The mistake they seem to have made, was to want them for women. A neat little four-hander, it provides meaty roles for an all-female cast.

Les Nuits du Hibou is a pre-revolutionary melodrama conceived and directed by Christian Dente. The Centre Dramatique de la Courneuve's contribution to the bi-centenary theatre programme, it is inspired by the writings of Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne (known as the Hibou — owl) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. Loïc Loeiz Hamon's raggle-taggle streets of Paris design and costumes ooze with atmosphere. The Parisians of the epoch come over as a filthy, farty, and indeed a pretty revolting lot. I was not sure whose side I was supposed to be on, as the aristocrats, except for the Marquis de Sade, are portrayed as a fairly civilized bunch of individuals. For me, the real baddies of the play were the middle class bourgeois who fomented the revolution, but who were overtaken three years later by the masses. Courneuve is one of Paris' less salubrious suburban, concrete wastelands, and it was hard not to see the symbolism between the pre-revolutionary low-life and that of today. As a production for the people by the people, its plethora of clever references are a little obscure if you do not happen to be deeply into 18th century French history and it tries to say too much, making two hours appear much longer. Throughout the summer it will be touring France.

La Levée from the theatrical stable of the Centre Dramatique National de Reims is, according to an impressively glossy press kit: 'five great hours of spectacle . . . a veritable theatrical adventure which, from 1792 to 1980, takes spectators from Valmy to Erfurt, taking in the siege of Mayence, the gallery of the Dresden Museum and Paris, at the moment of the coronation of Napoleon . . .' As a teaser, a morsel of this



La Levée — from the Centre Dramatique National de Reims — 'five hours of spectacle'. Photo: Gerard Richard

extravaganza was unveiled in Paris. This took the form of the showing of a video of the making of a ten minute film of the battle of Valmy, which is part of the aforementioned 'theatrical adventure', and the showing of the film itself. The video scanned over the 100 technicians engaged in making this masterwork plus the cast of a flock of birds, a kangaroo, ostrich, etc . . . and the 3000 school children playing the French army, in this factual battle against the invading Prussian army. Both the video and the real thing, were filmed in the most appalling weather conditions out in the fields of Valmy. Rain and the resulting sea of mud, produced never to be forgotten shots of shoals of children wearing protective blue dustbin liners over their hired 18th century uniforms. When it came to the screening of the film itself, my mouth gaped as all this technical and human abundance was reduced to a handful of barely lit sequences, mostly of mud caked Prussian soldier's feet. As for the 3000 children, in static, regimental ranks 2700 of them were distant pinheads, as the camera panned along the front row. All I could see was taxpayer's money being trampled under foot.

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do what I need to do. I am happy with my base here in New York.'

In a way, *Anything Goes* represents something refreshingly different from the mega-musicals of the past decade. Zaks is quick to point out that he is a great fan of the current hits of the genre and says, 'I am not of the school of' we are going to show them how, we are going to do a show that isn't overmiked and over this and over that'. But he hopes that this musical will bring something back to audiences. 'I think if we do our job, people are going to re-discover something great, that has

been undervalued recently — great music and lyrics. I think that we have come up with something that is stylistically a little different from what has taken the public in recent years and which probably is close to something that is used to grab them before electric sound and pageantry.'

With perennial numbers like: 'I Get a Kick Out of You', 'You're the Top', 'It's Delovely', 'Blow Gabriel, Blow', 'All Through the Night', 'The Gypsy in Me', 'Buddie, Beware' and of course the title song, the great strength of *Anything Goes* is the music. 'And that is as it should be', affirms Zaks, 'because, as far as I am concerned, it was my hearing the songs that made me go 'yes this is it — there is a reason to do this show'. Zaks opens his production with a recording of Cole Porter singing 'Anything Goes' which then segues into the live orchestra version. The show closes on a portrait of Porter who justly deserves his curtain call.

Zaks is thrilled that this production will reinforce the reputation of a great composer and lyricist. 'People have this image of Cole as a rich playboy type who took excursions floating down the Nile or the Amazon. But the guy worked all the time, both sitting on the deck of a ship, and at home, with a thesaurus, with a rhyming dictionary — finding the right word with the right sentiment and combining them with the right melody. And when you hear it done in a sexy, exciting, way with a pulse — even the ballads have a pulse — well then you can appreciate it and say this guy was a genius. It is genius. It's material that makes an audience want to lean forward to listen.'