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MICHAEL LE POER TRENCH

REWORKING MARTIN GUERRE

Three strikes, and it's a hit!

by Gerard Raymond

A TEENAGER in a 16th-century French village, humiliated by the entire community because he is impotent, abandons his young wife and goes off to fight in a war. Years later, he returns and is welcomed by his wife and the villagers. Shortly afterwards, though, he is accused of being an impostor and is put on trial. Just before a verdict is reached, the man whose identity he has in fact stolen appears in court to reclaim his wife and home.

"No one could invent a story like this — it had to be put on stage," exclaims Alain Boublil, lyricist and bookwriter of *Martin Guerre*, the new, Broadway-bound

musical opening this month at the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles. The show which Boublil wrote with his longtime collaborator, composer Claude-Michel Schönberg, is the latest take on the intriguing story which actually occurred in Artigat, a Pyrenean village in the south of France. A popular legend in its native country, the story of Martin Guerre has spawned several historical studies, novels, and plays and has also inspired two popular movies, a 1982 award-winning French movie starring Gerard Depardieu and a 1993 American remake starring Richard Gere and Jodie Foster. Indeed, Martin Guerre's story proved so compelling that the authors of the musical tried out two previous versions before

arriving at one which satisfied them — the current incarnation which is now touring North America prior to an April opening on Broadway.

Boublil and Schönberg are the authors of *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*, two of the most successful megamusicals of the 1980s. Reached separately by phone at their respective homes in London and Paris, the lyricist and composer talked about the genesis and evolution of the new musical that took them almost a decade to complete. During an audition for the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, Boublil had mentioned to his collaborator that he had an idea for a new show. "I said to Claude-Michel, 'Martin Guerre,' and he nearly fell out of his chair, because it was the same thing that he was about to tell me," relates Boublil.

This was the first time that the duo had both come up with the same subject; it was Boublil's idea to musicalize Victor Hugo's famous novel, and Schönberg had conceived the notion of transposing the story of *Madama Butterfly* to war-torn Vietnam. But unlike the two previous musicals, the writers had no literary or operatic source to fall back on this time around. "We had to invent every situation and every character," says Schönberg.

The first account of the Martin Guerre story was recorded by the judge who presided over the trial in 1560, but even he had admitted that he wasn't sure who was telling the truth. A comprehensive history of the incident was documented in 1983 by the American scholar Natalie Zemon Davis, who had previously co-

MICHAEL LE POER TRENCH



Erin Dilly as Martin Guerre's wife, Bertrand.

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authored the screenplay of the Depardieu movie *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*. But history alone wasn't enough to sustain an emotionally lush, operatic, Boubilil and Schönberg musical. "You have the huge problem of making people who are basically deceivers the romantic heroes of the evening," explains Boubilil.

Early in the writing stages, Boubilil and Schönberg decided that the musical was not going to succeed from a suspense angle. "The core of a musical evening has to be the score and the staging. [You do not see a musical] because you want to know how it ends," says Boubilil. "Particularly when the show is on tour and people in the next city know the story!" he adds laughing. In their version, the audience knows from the start that the man who claims to be Martin Guerre is actually

It's like a 747
taking off —
at some point you
can't stop the plane.

Arnaud du Thil, who believes he saw his friend Martin die on the battlefield. Crucially, Martin's wife, Bertrand, is not fooled either; she willingly takes Arnaud as her lover. By advancing the time frame of the story slightly, the authors place the love story of Bertrand and Arnaud against the turbulent backdrop of the long-standing religious wars between the Catholics and the Protestants. "It's the kind of story we have told so well before — simple people's stories lost in the turmoil of big events," remarks Schönberg.

It took three years before Boubilil and Schönberg were ready to present a draft of the show to Cameron Mackintosh, the producer who had steered their previous shows into huge international successes. In retrospect, both composer and lyricist say they hadn't finished their work before the wheels of the premiere West End production started turning. "There were a lot of people trying to help us but we were not ready with the story," recalls Schönberg. "But once a production starts, it's like a 747 taking off — at some point you can't stop the plane." The London production, which opened in 1996, got mixed reviews and never fully satisfied the authors. "From day one, our intention was to do something different from *Les Miz* and *Saigon*," says Schönberg. "We wanted to achieve something more rooted and earthy — more primary."

The authors' concerns and flagging box-office prompted producer Mackintosh to take the unusual step of stopping the production three months into its run and reopening it a few days later, after rewrites. The show eventually ran for over 700 performances, winning the 1997 Olivier Award for Best Musical. But Boublil and Schönberg weren't yet ready to close the chapter on *Martin Guerre*. "We didn't renounce this project, because we couldn't write another musical before we completed our thoughts on this one," explains Boublil.

Boublil and Schönberg got the opportunity for another crack at the musical when Jude Kelly, artistic director of the West Yorkshire Playhouse, offered to present what Schönberg calls "the authors' version" at her subsidized theater in Leeds, England. The third incarnation of *Martin Guerre* opened in Leeds in November 1998 under a new production team with 40 percent of the score revised and with about 90 percent of the lyrics rewritten. "This version is exactly what we wanted in the beginning," says Boublil.

While the story is substantially the same, the principal change in the Leeds *Martin Guerre*, which the authors have fine-tuned for the current U.S. tour, is one of focus. Now a medium-sized show, it concentrates on the three principals — Martin Guerre, Arnaud, and Bertrand. "It's a fascinating trio — the magic triangle which usually makes some of the best theater and opera," says Boublil. He explains that the new version develops the friendship between Martin and Arnaud and makes Bertrand a true heroine. "I have always been fascinated with this woman — how she could keep such a secret in her head and fool everybody," Boublil continues. "She goes through the impossible to hang on to this love which happens to her at a time when she thought that nothing good would ever happen in her life." □

Gerard Raymond is based in New York City and writes on theater and film.

Martin Guerre runs February 16 through April 8 at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles. For tickets or more information, please call (213) 628-2772, or visit their Web site at www.taperahmanson.com.



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