

THE CONCERT VERSION

Adapting Musicals for *Encores* and others

One day in the winter of 1994 Walter Bobbie called me up and asked if I would do a concert adaptation of a show called *Out Of This World*. Walter, whose work as an actor I was familiar with, had recently become Artistic Director of a new series called Encores. (Actually, it was called *Encores!* I'm going to omit the distracting punctuation.) The mission of Encores was to present forgotten, ignored, under-appreciated or unjustly failed American musicals "in concert," in other words basically without sets or costumes. The plan was to present three shows a year for five performances each at New York's City Center. Encores was then just about to enter its second season. *Out Of This World* was to be a part of it.

In their first season, Encores had presented musicals in their entirety, with actors at music stands and the orchestra in the pit. Now the idea was to put the orchestra onstage and do away with the music stands, presenting the shows script-in-hand, semi-staged. This meant that the books of those shows would have to be adapted. What did "adapted" mean? Nobody quite knew. I was going to have to make it up, with one small added complication: I knew next to nothing about musicals.

Since Encores was to have little by way of physical production, obviously one task of an adaptation would be to make the setting of a scene clear through the dialogue, almost as if the show were a radio play. Another challenge would be props: since performances were going to be book-in-hand, props needed to be written out or else reduced to very essential ones in order to give the actors a (literal) free hand to hold the script. Most crucially, since the accent was going to be on the score, the book would need trimming. The Encores shows that had failed in their

original productions had often flopped because of a bad book. My job would be to clear away some of the book's underbrush and let the music and lyrics and orchestrations shine. The books also needed trimming because, with an orchestra sitting there onstage and no set, the Encores audience was always subconsciously waiting for the next song. Dialogue scenes five pages long in a full production feel ten pages long in concert. Exposition, often bulky or spread out, also needed to be compressed.

My main objective, as I conceived it, was to give the audience the impression they'd seen the whole show even if they'd only gotten two-thirds or three-quarters of the book. That meant cutting so as to maintain the show's integrity, rhythm and tone. In the end I found that book scenes for Encores, except in rare unavoidable cases, shouldn't go longer than about four pages. Any added material or dialogue to patch in gaps demanded a kind of literary ventriloquism: figuring out the voice of the original bookwriter and writing dialogue in it.

Out Of This World presented a number of challenges as my first shot. It's a show from 1951 with a book by Dwight Taylor and Reginald Lawrence and music and lyrics by Cole Porter. The original production lasted a week. Amazingly, even in the 1950's orchestral parts and scripts of unsuccessful shows often got tossed out or mislaid after closing night no matter who wrote the score. With *Out Of This World*, three quite different versions of the show's book had survived, none of them a final production script. George Abbott, who'd directed, also cut some songs on the road including, unbelievably, "From This Moment On." At Encores we wanted to restore some cut songs but didn't know where or how they'd been introduced. My job was to pick, choose and collate scenes among the three scripts, writing bridge material if necessary, and drop in the lost songs. Ultimately, with the book tidied up, the Porter score spoke – or rather sang – for itself.

The older a show, the greater the chance that the book will be corrupt. The 1933 flop *Pardon My English* (book by Herbert Fields and Morrie Ryskind, music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin) survived in the form of a dense, rambling, single-spaced 150-page first draft without any songs at all. What the final show actually looked like we'll never know, because the production script didn't survive. My job in that instance was to cut the monster by more than half and try to make sense of the plot while slipping the numbers in. In certain places I could see where George and Ira had plucked out a patch of Ryskind's dialogue and turned it into a song. Elsewhere I had to make a place, sometimes but not always depending on the song order in the opening-night Playbill. When I had created a place for a song I then had to write a plausible lead-in.

Making sense out of the plot of *Pardon My English* could have been tricky but for the fact that Ryskind had written for the Marx Brothers, and *Pardon My English* is essentially a lost Marx Brothers show. That was my clue. In slimming it down, all I had to do was find the spine, accentuate the anarchy, and keep the best jokes. The show turned out to be a buried treasure, and audiences ate it up 70 years after its closing.

Face The Music was another seeming antique that ended up a gem. With a score by Irving Berlin and a book by Moss Hart, *Face The Music* premiered at the New Amsterdam in February 1932, ran for a then-respectable 165 performances and disappeared into musical theatre history. Startlingly enough, the show's plot prefigures *The Producers* by several decades, with a producer who sets out to purposely lose a lot of money on a Broadway show. Using the blissfully scattershot comic style typical of its age, *Face The Music* sends up showbiz, political corruption, nudity, optimism, parades, chorines, cows, and Catskill Resorts, among other things. The producer in the show even sets up his office on the corner of 46th and Broadway. That is, *literally*

on the corner of 46th and Broadway. His casting director wheels in potential actors on a cart. The inspired anarchy of the show should surprise no one, given that George S. Kaufman directed and Morrie Ryskind gave the script an uncredited assist. It turned out to be a joy and, along with *Strike Up The Band* and *Anyone Can Whistle*, a favorite Encores experience. I got an added kick when Moss Hart's son Chris lent me the show's original manuscript, scribbled in pencil on loose pages.

Older books needed the most cutting because older musicals often dawdled between songs. These days, when musicals tend to be constructed out of short, punchy scenes, we're just not used to shows that are top-heavy with dialogue, no matter how fine the chatter.

A prime example: the 1931, Pulitzer-Prize-winning show *Of Thee I Sing* (book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin). The show's first scene is hilarious but it's over 20 pages long. I managed to make it ten pages and nobody complained – not even Anne Kaufman, George S.'s flame-keeping daughter. When I first looked at the text of Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* for a concert with the New York Philharmonic, Alan Jay Lerner's book seemed perfect. I doubted it could be cut at all. Yet I took out 25 minutes and nobody noticed.

No, No, Nanette presented a wonderful challenge because Burt Shevelove adapted this 1925 show for a hugely successful 1973 revival – and it was the 1973 version, not the original, that Encores wanted to present. So I was adapting an adaptation, and a terrific one at that. Shevelove streamlined the show to a marvelous comic machine in which the songs provide breathing space from the delicious farce of the plot. And yet, trim as it was, the show was still too talky for Encores. The challenge was to keep all the plot complications without making the show seem hectic.

(Side note having nothing to do with anything: has anybody ever noticed that *Bye Bye Birdie* is a teen version of Euripides' *The Bacchae*? Sexy god comes to town, women go crazy, man tries to slip out of town in drag ...)

Shows that were created as star vehicles presented special adaptation challenges. *Dubarry Was A Lady* (book by Herbert Fields and B.G. De Sylva, music and lyrics by Cole Porter) premiered in 1939 as a vehicle for the comedian Bert Lahr. It's the story of Louie, a washroom attendant who gets hit on the head with a bottle and thinks he's Louis XIV. In the original *Dubarry* script you come upon stage directions like "Louie does the sneezing routine" or "Louie does the brushing routine." Of course, audiences specifically came to see Lahr doing his vaudeville sneezing and brushing routines but today we don't know what those were. Walter Bobbie and I, co-adapting that show for Encores, tried to come up with Lahr-like sneezing and brushing routines for Bobby Morse as Louie. A few years later I found myself faced with *Do Re Mi* (from 1960, with book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Jule Styne), which was written for Phil Silvers. At Encores, Nathan Lane – who is, among other things, the Phil Silvers of our day – felt free to massage the dialogue in certain places to make the show his and bend it into his own voice. An old star vehicle in this case succeeded because the new star took the wheel.

In the end I worked on 33 musicals for the Encores series over about 15 years, erasing some but not all of my pre-Encores musical ignorance. I guess I'm adaptable.

*