

## Bootie Call: "The Bootleggers On Broadway," at Circa '21 June 21 Through 24

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 20 June 2006 22:42

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Murder. Madness. Cannibalism. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the wonderful world of Broadway musicals!

Or rather, welcome to *The Bootleggers "On Broadway,"* the new, full-length production showcasing the talents of the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's performing wait staff. (The show runs at Circa '21 June 21 through 24.)

The Bootleggers - or Booties, as they're fondly referred to - traditionally serve as a *de facto* warm-up act to every main-stage production at Circa '21, performing a 15-minute pre-show entertainment that generally includes selections from Broadway musicals. (I performed *with* them from 1994 to 2005.) But *On Broadway* - a sequel of sorts to the group's *A Night on Broadway* from 2004 - lets the Bootleggers take center stage, in a two-act show featuring song-and-dance highlights from 20 current Broadway musicals.

After a day-long rehearsal last Monday, five Bootleggers - Jennifer Edwards, Brad Hauskins, Tom Lawrence, Andrea Moore, and Jan Schmall - have gathered to discuss the show. But for such a high-spirited group, the atmosphere in the room is remarkably subdued, and Lawrence appears to sum up the prevailing mood when he says, in regards to *On Broadway*, "It'll be like the last one. It'll be a nice thing to look *back* on."

The quintet's obvious exhaustion is partly due, of course, to having just come off a 12-hour rehearsal. But Schmall - a Circa '21 veteran since 1997 - suggests that the mood of the staff may also be influenced by the mood of the shows they're currently performing from.

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"It seems like Broadway right now is so much darker than it was," she says. "I mean, minor chords *everywhere. Sweeney Todd, The Threepenny Opera ...* . It's very dark right now."

She isn't kidding. Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, which focuses on a razor-wielding madman who makes meat pies out of London denizens, is currently a Broadway sensation, and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, with its tale of thieves, whores, and murderers, has been brought back in a decadent new revival as well.

"And then you've got the established shows that are also dark," says Hauskins, who joined the Circa '21 staff in 1987. "*Rent, Chicago ...* ." Add to these productions the hardships endured by the women of *The Color Purple*, the devious acts perpetrated in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, the Grand Guignol of *Phantom of the Opera*, the dramatic re-imagining of the witches in *Wicked* ... .

"Gone are a lot of those happy-fun shows," says Hauskins, explaining the "different atmosphere" of *On Broadway*. "This show has a much darker, more *thoughtful* mood than it did last [time]."

However, no production that also features highlights from such musicals as *Jersey Boys, Spamalot, Hairspray*, and *The Producers* could possibly be labeled "downbeat" - Edwards, who began her Circa '21 tenure in 1996, raves, "There's nothing that's *not* fun to do" - and the *Bootleggers* make clear that their exhaustion has less to do with the *On Broadway* material than it does with their recent work schedule.

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As with any restaurant job, servers work when customers show up; if business is bad, they don't. And since January, business at Circa '21 has been *very good*. The theatre's production of *Grease*, which ran from January through March, played to mostly sold-out crowds during its 12-week run, and their recent *Cats* did staggeringly well - for one of the first times in its history, balcony seating was added for the musical's final performances, and Circa '21 Marketing Director Brett Hitchcock calls *Cats* attendance the highest for any Circa '21 production "since the casinos came to town."

The Bootleggers will admit that the relentless schedule took its toll.

"When we did this the last time," says Hauskins, "we were in *Hello, Dolly!*, and *Hello, Dolly!* was n't selling. We were eager to work. We couldn't *wait* to get to work. Now we're in *Cats*, following *Grease*, and we are *sick* of each other, and we're sick of working, and it's just been crazy. For six months. It's been crazy."

Anyone who has waited tables will tell you that the job can be grueling, which Moore - who has worked at the theatre since 1998, and who took a Bootlegging hiatus to appear in *Cats* - will readily concede. "I waited on tables during the concerts," she says, referring to recent Circa '21 appearances by the Lettermen and the Russ Morgan Orchestra. "That. Kicked. My *Ass*. And I've been doing *Cats* for 12 weeks. I was *much* more tired [Bootlegging]. And physically? I was physically in more pain. I felt like I'd been beaten with *sticks*."

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But Lawrence - the senior member of the group, having started Bootlegging in 1981 - reveals that what often makes the job particularly draining is that, as a waiter-slash-entertainer, customers expect more than someone who'll simply refill their coffee and serve their desserts. "We're not just waiting on people," he says. "We're performing. At each table. At all *times*."

Hauskins adds, "The longer you work here, the more chance you have that somebody knows you, and you waited on them before. 'Hey! There's Brad! Say something funny!' And you have to remember, like, every funny story they told you ... . You're trying to play the hardest role that an actor will ever play. You're trying to play yourself."

"A lot of [customers] seem to think that the pre-show is the hardest thing we do," laughs Moore. "That's, like, *so* the vacation of the evening."

But don't mistake the Bootleggers' current exhaustion as any sign of *creative* exhaustion.

"There are always opportunities," says Schmall of Bootlegging. "Like the Christmas CD that we did, and the Bootlegger show both times. ... You have these things to look forward to," which include the chance to sing solos from favorite musicals - one of hers being *Sweeney Todd*. "That music is just *amazing*," she exclaims.

You also have the *job* to look forward to. And as Edwards - who has, for nearly a decade, taken frequent Bootlegging hiatuses while raising a family - attests, and the others agree, that's oftentimes enough. "I always get sucked back in here. I don't know how many times I've left. Three? Four? Maybe five? I always come back here because it makes me feel good, and I like the people, and I like the *customers*, and I *like* waiting on tables. It's like family. You fight like family, and they drive you nuts, but you love 'em and you care about 'em. And you *want* to be there."

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*For tickets to The Bootleggers "On Broadway," call (309) 786-7733 extension 2.*