



Staten Island Advance

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And Staten Island, too: A short history of B'way ties

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

The Island has no equivalent of “Brighton Beach Memoirs,” perhaps, but it enjoys ties to Broadway. Some are accidents of birth or address; some are more substantial.

Composer Galt MacDermot settled in Silver Lake around the time he was working on “Hair,” a huge hit. He’s a periodic attraction, usually fronting his New Pulse Band at local venues, including a recent SRO fund-raising concert at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in West Brighton.

Comparably, playwright/actor Anthony Wilkinson is a longtime resident, and author/star of “My Big Gay Italian Wedding,” playing off-Broadway currently. The playwright, who also assists local fund-raisers, has acknowledged that the characters are based on his own circle of local friends and family.

The borough regularly inserts itself into scripts as a reference and a setting. The best-loved citation? Maybe it is the “... and Staten Island, too” line from “Manhattan,” a number from “The Garrick Gaities,” written by Rodgers and Hart in 1925. Nearly a century later, Island performers/writers/composers surface every summer at Manhattan’s Fringe Festival.

In 1941, playwright Clifford Odets established the steamy action of his kitchen-sink drama, “Clash by Night” on the Island.

It didn’t help the production, which went quickly down the drain, despite celebrated personnel (Lee Strasberg directed Tallulah Bankhead and Lee J. Cobb, with Billy Rose producing). Bankhead, who did not enjoy working with Billy Rose, played a housewife who is having an affair with a friend of her husband’s.

The film version 12 years later starred the young Marilyn Monroe and moved off-Island, to Monterey, California.

Playwright Jane Bowles used an old South Shore farmhouse as the model for setting of “In the Summer House” which played on Broadway in 1953. Bowles was married to composer/novelist Paul Bowles. She had rented the place as a writers’ retreat.

The play didn’t have much of a run, although it was much-admired by Tennessee Williams.

The borough is an exotic destination in Neil Simon’s “Barefoot in the Park.” When the newlywed central couple allow their eccentric upstairs neighbor to choose a restaurant, he drags them off to an unnamed “Albanian restaurant on Staten Island.”

Playwright and novelist Paul Zindel (1936-2003) who grew up in Stapleton, used much local color in his Pulitzer Prize-winning “The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds,” which opened in 1970.

Zindel was a high school science teacher when he wrote the play, which revolves around a high-school science fair. Betty the Loon, the put-upon mother in the show, resembled his own mother. Like Betty, she hatched a succession of non-profitable money-making schemes and she took in elderly boarders.

Other Zindel plays, like “And Miss Reardon Drinks A Little,” had recognizable characters drawn from the playwright’s Island life in the 1960s.

DRINKING & CURSING

Zindel often acknowledge encouragement he received from playwright Edward Albee when Albee was teaching intensive writing workshops at Wagner College in the late 1960s. He was the most successful of Albee's Wagner students. The college was useful to Albee as well.

Two colorful campus colleagues, Willard Maas and Marie Menken, resemble the obstreperous senior figures of his masterwork, "Whose Afraid of Virginia Wolf" (1962). Like Albee's George and Martha, Maas and Menken liked to drink, swear, brawl and throw parties.

Still, Albee, himself a graduate of Trinity College in Connecticut, set "Whose Afraid" at an unspecified college campus in New England, not on Grymes Hill.

Wagner has a long-established theater department whose graduates who often move smoothly into professional settings. In 1993, it might have developed a rewarding tie to one of the huge hits of the 1990s although at the time it was just another musical-in-progress, an odd-sounding variation on "La Boheme," called "Rent."

Undercapitalized, unknown 32-year-old composer/librettist Jonathan Larson set the show, a rock opera, in a colorful East Village squatters enclave in the early days of AIDS-HIV. Sounds like a very long shot, doesn't it?

Larson, who was struggling to pay his own rent, had submitted a rough recording to the Stanley Drama Award, a competition administered at Wagner. He won. Later, he said that the \$2,000 in prize money bought him time to work on the show.

Three years later, the show was destined to be a huge hit, although Larson never knew as much. He suffered an aneurysm and died just hours after the final dress rehearsal, at 35.

(As it happens, "Rent" is being revived this summer off-Broadway. Previews start July 14 at New World Stages, 340 West 50th Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, and opening on August 11. For more information about it, visit siteforrent.com.)