

April 2006

## **Rise of Festivals: The Networking Life** **Festivals aren't just for scouting hits—they've become havens for feeding the country with new works**

By Terry Berliner

Can you pinpoint the moment when theatre festivals came to be considered hotbeds for the next hit musical? Here's a good guess: Thursday, September 20, 2001. That's the day *Urinetown: The Musical* officially opened on Broadway, completing its unlikely trek from a funky downtown New York City fringe festival to an Off Broadway venue and then an award-winning commercial run.

Festivals aren't exactly a new idea, but in recent years they've grown in both number and importance as a one-stop shopping place for producers and scouts. Some of the shows that have followed in *Urinetown's* footsteps to Off-Broadway solvency have been quirky entertainments with attention-getting titles—*The Joys of Sex*, *Debbie Does Dallas*, *Altar Boyz*, *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*—but in point of fact, the downtown-to-uptown commercial transfer is just one example of how the festival concept serves the larger musical-theatre world.

Festivals are really a nexus between artists and producers. They offer a process that allows for a musical to get from the page to the stage, not just to Broadway and Off Broadway, but also theatres across the country and beyond. What most people don't realize is that many musicals that have launched in festival settings have followed divergent paths to success, artistic and economic. Such varied properties as *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Children of Eden*, *The Flight of the Lawnchair Man* and *Princesses* all got their first outings under festival auspices. Each of the three major groups devoted to producing festivals of new musicals—the National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT), the New York Musical Theatre Festival (NYMF) and the National Music Theater Network (NMTN)—go about the work of offering developmental opportunities in different ways, but as breeding grounds for new musical productions they actually share more in common than just their similar acronyms.

### **National Alliance for Musical Theatre**

Eight new musicals are chosen each year for the two-day National Alliance for Musical Theatre presentations, which regularly take place in September or October in New York City. More than 125 new musicals are submitted by NAMT's member theatres, individual producers and literary agents. A lucky

few are chosen and then tailored into a 45-minute reading format. Each excerpt is presented twice for audiences filled with commercial, independent and resident-theatre producers from across the country. In short, it's "a producer's marketplace," says NAMT executive director Kathy Evans, an industry event open by invitation to people who have the position or the wherewithal to move a new musical along. Over the past 17 years of NAMT's 20-year existence, many individual producers and resident theatres have found new material in NAMT's festival, ranging from *The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin* to *Songs for a New World*. This season, writer and actor Bob Martin has credited the alliance as the springboard for his show *The Drowsy Chaperone*, which was produced by Los Angeles's Center Theatre Group and is now slated to open on Broadway May 1. *I Love You Because*, which was presented last year at NAMT, opened in February at the Village Theatre in New York City.

Because its festivals aren't open to the general public, recognition for NAMT has remained limited to those in the know. For them, the value of NAMT festivals is clear: The organization supplies the venue, all technical support, a consulting producer from its membership, a casting director and discounted rehearsal-space rental, not to mention access to the press and the audience. Equity determines a 29-hour rehearsal and performance period for the staged reading. Actors receive \$100, directors and stage managers get a small stipend, and the show's writers can distribute CDs and copies of their scripts to the very people who can actually give a new musical some legs.

"NAMT is a kind of champion for the writer," Evans says. "We try to make the marketplace personal by providing the interaction between writers and producers." NAMT offers its festival alumni writers a network system: They have access to their own section of the website and can communicate with NAMT's member producers. NAMT also functions as a liaison throughout the year. A member theatre (such as 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle, TheatreWorks in California, North Shore Music Theatre in Massachusetts or the Human Race Theatre Company in Ohio) might contact NAMT and say, "I'm looking for a new musical with a cast of four." With its huge directory of past festival offerings, NAMT can immediately offer suggested titles and contact information.