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Planting the Seeds of New Musicals

By Rick Pender

When you see a show like *Emma*, the Jane Austen musical recently presented at the Cincinnati Playhouse (pictured), do you ever wonder where it came from? If you paid attention to some of the Playhouse's publicity, you might know it premiered at TheatreWorks in Palo Alto, Calif., where it was a big box-office hit. In fact, the theater's artistic director Robert Kelley, who staged the original, and several cast members from the original production came together again in Cincinnati for the Playhouse production.



But how did *Emma* and composer-lyricist Paul Gordon get to TheatreWorks? Dig back a bit deeper, you'll find an association of organizations that make up the National Alliance of Musical Theatre (NAMT). *Emma* got its start in NAMT workshops and a festival, as did another popular Playhouse production, *Ace*, which had a good run here, in St. Louis and at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego.

Ace, with music composed by Cincinnati native and University of Cincinnati grad Richard Oberacker, is another product of collaborations and joint efforts through NAMT. Following a successful run at Signature Theatre in Arlington, Va., *Ace* appears to be on its way to Broadway.

I learned more about NAMT in a recent telephone interview with the organization's director, Kathy Evans, and producer Sue Frost of Junkyard Dog Productions, who is part of the team pointing a NAMT-cultivated musical version of the late 1970s drama *Vanities* toward a run in New York City. NAMT was founded in 1985 and is dedicated exclusively to musical theater. It has 140 members in 31 states and eight countries. Members range from theaters and presenting organizations (like Dayton's Human Race Theatre Company) to universities (including UC's College-Conservatory of Music and the theater program at Wright State University) and individual producers.

NAMT's process is to nurture the creation, development, production, presentation and recognition of new and classic musicals and to provide a forum for sharing resources and information. Principal among NAMT's programs to make this happen is an annual festival of new musicals, which just concluded its 20th year earlier this week.

Presented at New World Stages on the northern edge of New York City's theater district, the festival offered eight new musicals in distilled presentations of 45 minutes featuring lots of Broadway talent, including Tony nominees and winners.

"It's a marathon for industry insiders," Evans says, noting that as many as 500 people attend. "Most shows hand out a CD of their material," she adds.

That's how many theaters first discover shows like *Ace* and *Emma*. The list of NAMT products includes familiar titles that have gone on to considerable acclaim: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Children of Eden*, *The Drowsy Chaperone* and *Songs for a New World*. Another show with roots at NAMT's festival is a 2006 piece, *Vanities*, set for a Broadway run opening in February 2009. Jack Heifner's original off-Broadway play chronicled three Texas teens from their high school years through adulthood. Now it has a score by David Kirshenbaum, and it seems like a show that audiences — at least female audiences — will love. I saw it in a pre-Broadway tryout at Pasadena Playhouse recently, and it has qualities that appeal to theaters (easy to produce and utilizing an affordable three-woman cast) and audiences (nostalgia and bittersweet personal drama).

Producer Sue Frost traced *Vanities*' path from the 2006 NAMT festival to the Pasadena production late last summer. "Perhaps," she speculates, "this process is the new version of 'going out of town'" to try out a new musical with an audience. If so, that evolution has worked well, from *Vanities*' festival appearance to its recent staging. The work has picked up a final scene, which includes a reconciliation that brings the women's stories closer to the present and re-establishes their connections after years of misunderstanding, a more palatable ending for a musical.

The performance I saw was well received. I should add that it featured a wonderful performance by 1992 CCM grad Lauren Kennedy as Mary, the most flamboyant member of the trio.

Moving a musical from concept to reality is an arduous collaborative task. NAMT is making that task a bit easier. The result could mean more interesting musicals for our theaters.