

Venerable Musicals *Drood* and *Hair* Receive Local Revivals

By Tom Provenzano

SOMETIMES IT IS JUST AS EXCITING to see a different view of a familiar play or musical as is the discovery of a new and vibrant theatrical work. Revivals offer directors and actors an opportunity to rethink and often find radically new tactics to breathe fresh life into favorite scripts. When speaking to directors of revivals, there is almost always an air of excitement because the director's concept holds as much sway as that of the playwright or composer, whose work on the show is usually finished.



One such director is Douglas Clayton, who lives successfully in both the artistic and production-administration ends of theatre (he is the newly appointed Member Services Manager of LA Stage Alliance). But it is his directing that fills him with the most glee; currently he is helming a revival of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Drood was a 1986 Broadway hit and five-time Tony Award winner, including two for composer/writer Rupert Holmes. Clayton speaks euphorically about his plans for the revival, especially about his coup of receiving permission to add a song that had been stricken from the original show. The number, "An English Music Hall," is the perfect tool for Clayton's reimagining of the show. He plans to place the audience within the ambiance of the Music Hall as actors mingle with the crowd.

His concept is perfectly in tune with the style of Sacred Fools, so he is extremely happy to be creating the show with that company. He explains, "Sacred Fools is ideal for my idea. Their space can be transformed into an opium den that has been refurbished into a music hall. Also there is always a party atmosphere at Fools. They regularly do late-night shows that have a lot of audience interaction—and their actors' performance styles are something I wanted for the show.

"It has so many different elements to it. First of all it's Dickens so you have these huge, strong characters, not quite cartoons but definitely larger

than life people. We need actors who are not afraid to make bold choices. Actors will be in the seats with the audience at all times so I needed performers who are unafraid of chatting and entertaining in an improvised setting. They also have to grasp the correct level of bawdiness. It is a Dickens party, which means basically PG-13. There is a lot of discussion of prostitution and opium smoking and that sort of thing but it is not graphic, not disgusting."

"One of the interesting things about *Drood* is that it has a very eclectic mix of musical styles." —DOUGLAS CLAYTON

But can the Sacred Fools sing? Clayton quickly responds, "One of the interesting things about *Drood* is that it has a very eclectic mix of musical styles; Rupert's whole idea of the show was to be an homage to the music hall. Some of the roles are much more about performance and character and communicating to the audience rather than incredible singing. About four roles require ridiculously talented singers."

In addition to the fortune of having Holmes' input with the added song and a cast of wild actors, Clayton couldn't be happier about casting the key role of Princess Puffer which needs an extremely special actress. Clayton was given the suggestion of Alexandra Billings. He soon learned she was a popular transgendered actress/cabaret artist. "I called her manager. As it turned out it was the first show she'd ever seen on Broadway and it was a huge life-changing thing for her." She quickly responded she would love to do the show.

An interesting wrinkle in this business of revivals: *Drood* has not played in Southern California since 1994; now suddenly there are four other planned nearby productions. Rather than be concerned, Clayton has decided to embrace the idea and has been in contact with the other venues to do some cross-promotion.

While purveyors of revivals are generally motivated to move the plays in bold new directions, some producers stay involved to keep the original intent and concept in tact. One such impresario is Michael Butler, a businessman and real estate tycoon who dabbles in theatre—if "dabbling" can mean co-producing the 1968 Broadway production of *Hair* and guiding hundreds of productions in the four decades since.

Currently he is underway on a production at the Met Theatre. He tells us, "It is a terrific stage, perfect size, wonderful seating." He and his close friend, collaborator and *Hair* director Bo Crowell

DROOD: THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD

Opens Sept. 21;
plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm; through Nov. 3
Tickets: \$15-\$25
Sacred Fools Theater Company
660 N. Heliotrope Dr.,
Los Angeles
310.281.8337 or
www.DroodInLA.com

HAIR

Opens Sept. 14;
Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 3 pm; through Nov. 3
Tickets: \$30-\$34
The MET Theatre
1089 N. Oxford Ave., Hollywood
323.957.1152 or
www.theMETTheatre.com



Michael Butler surrounded by the MET cast

are committed to keeping the show fresh yet still based on the original staging. "Every director brings his own taste to the project but it has a very strong structure. Because of its free form people thought it was a non-book show. That is absolutely incorrect. It has a very strong book. One of the problems we have is keeping control of kids who when they have a good bit want to improve upon it."

Butler has literally seen *Hair* thousands of times, and never tires of its joyful social message and production values. "I started in it because of politics and I have stayed in it because of politics," Butler explains, "I find that 2008 is a more serious time than 1968. I think a lot of people agree with me. My basic message is peace. I follow Eisenhower's lead when he warned of the military industrial establishment being the most dangerous thing that exists in this country. We are now the merchants of death for the world. Everything else is secondary. We are spending \$12 billion a month in Iraq when we have tons of problems in this country."

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His relationship with *Hair* is personal as well as political. He says, "I fell in love with the whole scene and I have gotten very deeply involved with the tribes—that's what we call our casts. There is a close knit community of *Hair* tribes. Thousands. When we have a reunion, several hundred people show up."

His commitment to the tribes keeps him constantly attached to the show and interested in helping those who want to produce it. "We have a very large archive, largest of any show in existence. It is an extraordinary resource for directors."

Though he no longer possesses the theatrical rights to the show, Butler's great trophy is his ownership of the famous mirror image logo that most productions want to use and must go through him to obtain.

Butler began in theatre as a glorified gofer for legendary producer Roger Stevens. That contact led him to Joseph Papp and the original production of *Hair*, which Butler took over as Papp moved on to other projects. Though his life is filled with myriad other business dealings, *Hair* has been his lifelong passion. ■

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-Jeffrey Lyons, NBC's "Reel Talk"

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