



Peter Filichia's **DIARY**

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Only a Kingdom - But More Than That

It happens at least once a month. A friend or - in this case - a friend of my girlfriend says, "Listen, I know someone who's written a musical and would love to get some feedback and some advice on how to get to the next step." And while I've wasted quite a few evenings with people who turn out to not know the first thing about musicals, utter amateurs who have written atrocities, I still say yes. I've just come to expect very little, that's all.

With my girlfriend busy with her second-Monday-of-the month poker game, I agreed to meet Judith Shubow Steir at 6 p.m., and even threw in the bonus of offering her my second seat to TACT's production of *The Late Christopher Bean* at 7:30 p.m. As soon as I did though, I thought I may have made a mistake. A more likely scenario would be my wanting to get away from this so-called author after a difficult hour-and-a-half.

Steir turned out to be, as the expression goes, "no kid," but had a youthful vigor. Of course, I knew a large manila envelope would soon be proffered, and there it was. Yes, Steir told me, she had written book, music, and lyrics, which is rarely a good sign. How many "triple threats" in the history of Broadway have succeeded? As Sondheim -only a double threat himself- once wrote, "Damn few."

But here's the thing: Steir raised a hand as if to ward off the objection she knew was coming, and said, "I know, I know. People don't take you seriously when you've done all three." And I had to give her credit for that much awareness.

Steir turned out not to be a trained musician, too. I was going to gallantly bring up that Irving Berlin hadn't been either - but she brought him up first, before mentioning Lionel Bart and Bob Merrill, too. This lady had the answers.

All right, time to see what the show was, and my heart sank when it turned out to be about Windsor and Wally's affair. Yup, a *Duchess and Duke of Windsor* musical called *Only a Kingdom*, "But most of the people who buy theater tickets are women," said Steir. "And women love stories of royalty, and stories of romance, too. And what better proof of a man's love than this? I've heard women say to their men. "Would you have done that for me?"

Good arguments all. And, to be fair, the best musicals do have big characters (from *Dolly* to *Jesus Christ Superstar*) and big events (from a Paris Opera House disaster to the signing of the Declaration of Independence). *Only a Kingdom* scored on both those fronts, too.

But I pointed out that the story didn't have youth appeal, and Steir talked about the still-considerable audience of women of a certain age who would love to go to the theater and see a show like this. When I said that producers like young people because they spend money at the souvenir counter, Steir was countering with jewelry replications they could buy. No matter what argument I came up with why there was no way that *Only a Kingdom* could succeed, Steir always came up with a rebuttal - and never a weak one.

That Steir had a CD of the show didn't mean all that much; one doesn't need that much money to press one nowadays. But wait! This one said: "Original Cast recording from the 1998 Pasadena Playhouse Production." The show had already been done. I also gave Steir credit for answering truthfully when I bluntly asked if she had to put up the money for it. Yes, some, she admitted, but she didn't have to put up all of it. Most people I've talked to in her position have lied about this. I also applauded her for saying: "The Variety critic hated it" and not keeping that from me. But one person's opinion was not going to stop her.

And speaking of one person's opinion: The show had been directed by Scott Schwartz. In an interview Steir showed me, he was quoted as saying that he "loved" the music. Lord knows that Schwartz has been hearing show music literally since he was in the womb, and he certainly knows good from bad, Hmmm.

Since then Steir also received productions in Massachusetts and North Carolina - but then nothing. How to get to the next step?

Good question. But it was time to go off to Sidney Howard's *The Late Christopher Bean*, which is terrific, by the way; another complete success from TACT, The Actors Company Theater, my favorite troupe in the city. Bless Scott Alan Evans, Cynthia Harris and Simon Jones for finding these forgotten-but-still wonderful plays and the directors (in this case, Jenn Thompson) who bring them so lovingly to life.

I mention this for two reasons: One, to recommend that you rush to this exemplary production that spoofs an upwardly mobile Yankee family who only becomes interested in the paintings they've had hanging around the house when they hear they're worth something. Turns out their maid has a most valuable one, and they'll try to cheat her out of it. The nine actors are accomplished, to be sure. but, oh, that Mary Bacon as the maid!

But the second reason I mention this is that one can tell a great deal about a person from how he - or, in this case, she - reacts to a play. Steir was with it every step of the way, laughing in (at least what I considered to be) the right places, enjoying seeing events play out as they did, following and appreciating the subtext and subtleties of the work. This is one sharp cookie, I decided.

Nevertheless, it was with great trepidation the next morn when I put the disc of *Only a Kingdom* into my CD player. I feared I was going to hear something terribly derivative, a musical that was written by someone who'd seen a great many musicals and aped every convention. No. The melodies are really quite lovely, and I came away thinking that if this woman hadn't opted for marriage and children in an era when women routinely did that, she truly might have had a career on Broadway. She may not be a trained composer, but her melodic gift is distinctive.

I hope someone gives her a chance. Take a look at such publications as *Dramatists Sourcebook*, and what do you see? Theater after theater lists in their "special interests" listings that they want minority playwrights. But what about that minority no one talks or seems to care about - the older writer? Sure, youth must be served, but room should be made for someone at the other end of the age spectrum, too?

Isn't there some producer out there who'd at least like to read or hear this show? Only a *Kingdom* will only take a few hours of your time, and who knows what it might lead to? You may e-mail Peter at pfilichia@aol.com

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