

'Spider Woman' Maps New Musical Terrain

By Sheridan Morley
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IT is presumably some sign of the changing Broadway times that the most important new musical of the season, Hal Prince's staging of the John Kander-Fred Ebb-Terrence McNally "Kiss of the Spider Woman," should have opened last week not in Manhattan, but fully 45 minutes from Broadway, on the campus of the State University of New York at Purchase, New York.

The premiere launches Prince's New Musicals Project, which plans to produce 16 musicals over the next four years in surroundings far removed

THEATER

both geographically and emotionally from the high tension of a make-or-break first night along what was once the Great White Way.

"Kiss" is well on the way to becoming one of the most intriguing and maybe even exciting American musicals of the decade. It is precisely the kind of show that needs to be worked out far away from the ludicrous economics and critical pressures of Manhattan.

True, it is more than a little long, and sometimes uncertain of focus. Based on the novel by Manuel Puig that has already become a hit movie and, in London, a play, it tells of two prisoners sharing a cell in a contemporary Latin American prison. One, an outrageously homosexual window dresser, is in for sexual offenses. The other is a political prisoner. The musical, like the novel, is about an odd-couple friendship behind bars as well as the way that all womankind becomes one single object of maternity and sexual passion to men denied any contact with them.

The framework of the prison, with its magical imaginary world behind bars, is wonderfully suited to the showbiz glitz of Kander and Ebb, who can conjure up Carmen Miranda memories or '30s shipboard musicals in the split-second that it takes a prisoner to start to dream. Some of their big numbers here, notably the closing "Only in the Movies" — and before that "Dear One" and "You Could Never Shame Me" — are among the greatest that team has ever achieved.

At other times, however, control of the musical seems elusive, as we lurch from "South Pacific" through "Privates on Parade" to "Cinema Paradiso" in search of a framework that allows all of the themes of homosexuality and political conscience and idealized sexual and maternal love that are at the heart of Puig's complex novel. John Rubinstein, as the over-the-top window dresser, and Kevin Gray, as the taciturn revolutionary, finally come together in the shadow of the symbolic spider woman herself, played, as are all the other symbolic heroines in the musical, by Lauren Mitchell. Her performance lacks the confidence of those around her, and there are moments when the Hollywood parodies clash awkwardly with a South American reality that has more to do with sudden execution than another Carmen Miranda fruit-salad hat.

But at a time when Broadway is loaded with old movies brought back to stage life, it is characteristic of the courage and innovation of Prince and Kander/Ebb that they have chosen not some safe old celluloid vehicle but one of the most dangerous and difficult and controversial of modern movies to bring to the musical stage.

"Kiss of the Spider Woman" is more than just a beginning: It is an indication that, away from Broadway itself, the American musical is not only alive and well but also pushing through the nostalgia and the safe London imports and the general big-budget caution of Broadway to arrive at an altogether different way of doing big-band shows for the 1990s.



GARY

Gary Smith

Jonathan Culler, top, and Ewan Hooper in the double bill at the Royal Court.

Back in London, the good news is that in a fractionally easier economic climate, the Royal Court has managed after more than a year to reopen its studio, Theatre Upstairs, with a double-bill of political dramas that serve as a kind of anti-Thatcher history of the last 10 years.

The first of these two plays, if that is not too strong a term for what are in effect conversation pieces staged with minimal movement by Max Stafford-Clark and Simon Curtis, is a revival of "Falkland Sound," the 1983 collection of letters from a Royal Navy officer, eventually killed in that conflict, to his father and family.

What gives these letters their immense theatrical power is their clenched, understated Englishness. David Tinker (Jonathan Culler) and his father, Hugh (Ewan Hooper), seem to be characters out of some World War II movie directed by David Lean and scripted by Noël Coward, one for which you expect Celia Johnson to have been the unseen mother. And as this doomed, archetypal English officer finally comes to terms with the terrible futility of war in general and the Falklands in particular, the change in mood of an entire nation seems to be summarized in his taut, heartfelt, and heartbreaking letters from the battle zone.

The second half of the double bill finds Thatcherism no longer in triumphant militancy but in shadowy decline, as "Gibraltar Strait" investigates the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in 1988 through the eyewitness accounts of those involved.

Run like an inquest, the production simply places five men and women on chairs facing the audience and has them recount in teledocumentary fashion the confused events leading up to the shootings, and then the attempts of various special-interest groups to unscramble the whole symbolic disaster with minimum damage to their own causes.