

THE PHOENIX

Stage craft

The magic in ShowBusiness and Casting About

By GERALD PEARY | June 5, 2007



SHOWBUSINESS: Boy George invokes the curse of Andrew Lloyd Webber.

If your escape to New York must include a tune-filled stage show, then the documentary of your dreams is Dori Berinstein's lively, bouncy *ShowBusiness: The Road to Broadway*, which opens this Friday at the Kendall Square. The stage door opens for you to slip behind the curtains and watch up close as four Broadway-slated musicals rehearse and then move toward opening night and beyond. Even this artsy snob was sucked in by the backstage escapades and the roar-of-the-greasepaint thespian personalities, though I wouldn't be caught in a coma attending the sillier musicals.

I'm talking about *Wicked*, in which the Witches of the East and West (from L. Frank Baum and MGM) face off in an overproduced evening of mainstream songs for creaky, nostalgic-for-Judy boomers. I also mean *Avenue Q*, cutesy puppets doing R-rated shtick for aging TV kids weaned on the Muppets. Both are still playing to the tourist unwashed in 2007, but they premiered in 2004, and that's the Broadway season Berinstein follows in *ShowBusiness*, cinéma-vérité style.

Backstage at *Wicked* is the least involving part of *ShowBusiness*. It's a conventional musical starring bland, big-voiced performers and manufactured by well-heeled, Broadway-seasoned backers. The *Avenue Q* sections are more interesting because the movie stays with the first-time book-and-lyrics team, Bobby Lopez and Jeff Marx, likable and unspoiled twentysomethings. Although *Caroline, or Change*, the third musical, seems preachy and heavy-handed, the creators are great, high-class company: Jeanine Tesori (composer), Tony Kushner (book), George C. Wolfe (director).

The most fascinating episodes of *ShowBusiness* surround the opening and the gruesome closing (executive producer Rosie O'Donnell lost \$10 million) of *Taboo*, a glam retelling of the 1980s glory days of Boy George. The best songs by far are from this musical, which was penned by George himself; and the best-delivered vitriol is by George, no longer a glitter boy, at the musical's demise. He curses the critics, who were ambivalent about his

show: “You’ll have Andrew Lloyd Webber for the rest of your lives.”

Are actors — or actresses, in the case of Barry J. Hershey’s *Casting About*, which starts this Friday at the Coolidge Corner — different creatures from you and me, graced with a delicate spiritual calling? Are they in mesmerizing contact with an otherworld? Are the best of them able to plumb their wells of private emotion and, in lieu of speaking in tongues, share these with an astounded, grateful audience? Yes, actors are special people, and it’s both a curse and a benediction — that’s what I got out of this lovely, almost embarrassingly intimate documentary, which was made by a host of talented Boston filmmakers.

The set-up is simple: we’re witness to the tryouts for a fiction feature, something to do with an artist model, a movie that, as it turns out, never gets made. Instead, the tryouts become the stuff of the movie — they’re sliced up by editor Marc Grossman into lush montage sequences: readings, movement exercises, the actresses talking about their real-life persons. What raw, exposed moments! The tryouts reveal so much! Hershey and the auditioning producer, Lewis Wheeler, have power over all these vulnerable women, and that’s implicitly acknowledged. Would the actresses be willing to do a nude scene? But any whiff of sexism is mitigated by the work of the extraordinary camerawoman, Allie Humenuk. Every woman she shoots, and lights, seems incandescent: intensely interesting and profoundly beautiful.

Source: <http://thephoenix.com/Boston/movies/41184-stage-craft/>