Music To Their Ears: ANMT’s Bi-Annual Musical Theater Writers Conference

by Ed Rampell | July 23, 2012

Meet the Artistic Directors panel: John Michael Beck of Celebration Theatre, Tim Dang of East West Players, Daniel Henning of the Blank Theatre) and Terence McFarland of LA STAGE Alliance

The L.A.-based Academy for New Musical Theatre presented its bi-annual Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz Conference for musical theater writers from Friday through Sunday at the NoHo Arts Center. The intensive event focused on why it’s called “show business” and not “show art,” with nine panels and presentations focusing on the more practical side of bringing singing stage productions to investors and audiences alike. The pragmatic “how to” confab was part symposia, part boot camp, part morale booster for ink-stained individuals who often create alone in those fabled garrets reserved for starving artists.

Conference panelists and presenters included successful writers, entertainment attorneys, industry representatives, publicists, backers, producers and more, with sessions geared for composers, lyricists, librettists and playwrights, who did not have to be Academy members in order to participate. Up to 60 writers ranging from newbies to the produced traveled from as far away as Melbourne, Australia, from New York and throughout California to attend what may be the only US-business-oriented powwow of its kind regarding musicals aimed solely at scribes. The conference format also gave attendees time to socialize, network and develop a sense of community during frequent breaks and meals provided as part of the overall package by ANMT, a non-profit organization headquartered in North Hollywood which offers one of only three professional programs in the US for musical theater writers, composers and lyricists.

Meet the Writers panel: Cheri Steinkellner and Paul Gordon
Following an opening night “schmooze,” the weekend conference was kickstarted Friday evening by two Tony-nominated talents in a “Meet the Writers” panel moderated by ANMT artistic director Elise Dewsberry. Cheri Steinkellner, who wrote the book for *Sister Act* and Paul Gordon, composer/lyricist of *Jane Eyre*, each discussed the writing process and compared their experiences of having a show run on Broadway. Gordon found he had far more creative control when his work was presented at the Rubicon, an Equity-contracted company in Ventura County, as opposed to when *Eyre* ran on the Great White Way. Gordon said he likes to start working solo and then collaborate, while Steinkellner, who co-writes with her husband Bill and comes from a TV background where she wrote sitcoms such as *Cheers*, was used to the writers room and a more collaborative process.

During Saturday morning’s “Opening Remarks” ANMT’s executive director Scott Guy gave a presentation on the Academy’s producer-driven professional branch. Dewsberry delivered an overview of the ANMT curriculum. The ensuing “Keynote Address” presented a Skype interview with Scott Wittman, lyricist and writer of *Hairspray* and a producer, writer and composer of the *Smash* NBC-TV series.

![Keynote address by video Skype with Scott Wittman, co-executive director and co-lyricist of "SMASH!"](image)

In the “Meet the Future” session, each conference attendee verbalized a short pitch about themselves and their projects. Their various musicals ranged widely in terms of how developed they were and regarding subject matter, from the historical — a play about the War of 1812 — to one set 200 years later with a ripped-from-the-headlines story about the Occupy Wall Street movement. Gay-themed musicals such as *The Max Factor Factor* and the Jewish-oriented *Eating, Praying, Loving* were pitched by writers. One attendee called himself “a recovering CPA”; a former psychotherapist quipped that he was “made crazy” by 30 years of practice; and a wobbly, elderly novelist cracked everyone up by declaring he was currently “working on
standing up.” Overall, during the conference participants went on to do more pitching than Sandy Koufax at the World Series.

Seven panelists with insider info discussed the pros and cons of assorted contests and the like in the “Meet the Festivals” session, which focused on these outlets as launching pads for exposure, advice, contacts and more. The Festival of New American Musicals’ co-founder and co-executive producer Bob Klein said that when this fete began five years ago there was “something rotten in the musical theatre world” — namely, according to Klein, a lack of support for the development of new musicals, as opposed to reviving vintage shows. Since 2006 Festival of New American Musicals has introduced more than 100 works.

UC Irvine associate professor of musical theatre Gary Busby discussed the advantages of working with an academic institution with a readymade supply of actors, musicians, etc., to launch a show from scratch. Lindsay Lefler, general manager of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, invited submissions, saying, “Every other month we present four new musicals that are 10 to 15 minutes long” and have a certain offbeat sensibility. “Every show is sold out. Our audiences want to see something weird and shocking… Showcases provide good opportunities to see what works.” Talents Erik Przytulski, Jordan Beck and Jonathan May spoke about the submission process and the opportunity to present work at the ASCAP Musical Theatre Workshop and ASCAP/Dreamworks 2012, which includes coveted feedback from musical theater gurus such as Stephen Schwartz (Wicked) and Stephen Bray (The Color Purple).

The afternoon’s “Meet the Lawyers” marathon was arguably worth the conference’s price of admission. Attendees fired questions at entertainment attorneys Gordon P. Firemark and Michael R. Blaha for 105 minutes, as the lawyers dispensed legal advice while waiving their usual hourly rates and other fees. Both legal eagles stressed the importance of “getting it in writing,” collaboration agreements, copyright violations, the importance of the Dramatists Guild, non-disclosure agreements and more legalistic showbiz nuts and bolts.
The day’s final panel, “Meet the Artistic Directors,” was moderated by LA Stage Alliance executive director Terence McFarland. Although some of these panelists who give thumbs up or down to productions at their playhouses had different titles, they all discussed what they were looking for and how they should — and should not — be approached. (Note to aspiring scribblers: Waylaying artistic directors in theater lobbies may not exactly endear you to them.) Getting to know theaters before writers submitted to them was emphasized by the house honchos. “It’s offputting for a writer to submit material to a theater that’s not appropriate,” lamented Boston Court’s Michael Michetti.

Tim Dang explained that downtown LA’s East West Players focuses on the Asian American experience, while John Michael Beck said Celebration Theatre is one of the longest continuously running theatrical venues geared for the LGBT community. However, Beck warned, don’t query him with a message proclaiming your play is perfect for Celebration “because it’s so gay!” — which he actually considers to be insulting.

Steven Glaudini of Musical Theatre West participated. NoHo Arts Center’s Kevin Bailey said, “new plays and musicals is exclusively what we do.” Daniel Henning noted the Blank Theatre Company has a well-known writing contest for aspiring playwrights 19 and under, although the Blank also presents edgy, adult works as well — such as a revival of the proletarian classic The Cradle Will Rock. Karyl Lynn Burns said that the Rubicon Theatre has “a commitment to a variety of works, classical and innovative. We’ve had 15 world premieres.”

The first two days of ANMT’s Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz Conference for Musical Theatre Writers gave its aspiring dramatists, lyricists, composers and librettists plenty of ammunition for crossing the Rubicon into the world of professional musicals.
Meet the Producers panel: Schoen Smith of Venture Hill Entertainment, Gregg Maday of Warner Entertainment, Michael Jung of Disney Imagineering, Brian McDonald of the Rubicon Theatre, Oanh Nguyen of the Chance Theatre Anaheim and Scott Guy of ANMT

Editor’s note: Ed Rampell covered the Academy for New Musical Theatre’s bi-annual Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz Conference for musical theater writers, in NoHo last weekend. For his report on the first two days of the event, go [here](#). And now, what happened on Sunday:

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare wrote: “If music be the food of life, play on.” And so it was with the third day of the LA-based Academy for New Musical Theatre’s bi-annual Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz Conference for musical theater writers, which on Sunday continued playing on, presenting four final panels at the NoHo Arts Center.

Continuing with the confab’s no-nonsense approach of administering a heavy dose of reality to starry-eyed theatrical idealists, the “Meet the Reps” panel introduced book writers, lyricists, librettists and composers to essential industry representatives. Larry Dean Harris, the Dramatists Guild’s Southern California regional rep, is himself a playwright who “was on the ledge” due to problematic business dealings — until this labor organization, which supports the rights of those who write for the stage, helped straighten things out. “Now I advocate for people like me,” said
Harris, who went on to explain that the “the Guild is New York-based, but in the last few years it made the decision to go national and now has 30-plus regional representatives.”

Meet the Reps panel: Michael Van Duzer of Equity, Dan Berkowitz of ALAP, Larry Dean Harris of the Dramatists’ Guild and Michael Kerker of ASCAP

The Dramatists Guild presents national and local programs geared for stage writers and fosters a sense of community for those in a profession of often solitary toilers. It sets industry standards and provides members with templates for collaboration agreements and the like, plus a monthly magazine. Perhaps most important, the Guild’s business affairs division provides legal assistance, which includes reviewing contracts and rendering expert advice before writers ink the proverbial parchments and sell their souls to the devil.

Michael Van Duzer, an Actors’ Equity business representative, explained contractual nuances regarding pay scales for members of the chorus, as opposed to principals, and painstakingly defined the differences. These details were emblematic of the conference’s emphasis on the business side of the “show business” equation, which writers sometimes neglect, even as they tune in to their inner muse.

The panel also included two American Federation of Musicians reps — Michael Ankney, Professional Musicians Local 47’s business rep for its live performance referral service, and Paul Castillo of the Theatre Musicians’ Association. Michael Kerker, who divides his time between New York and Los Angeles as ASCAP director of musical theatre, explained that the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers collects and distributes royalties from venues that play music — from cabarets to elevators to discos to supermarkets — to members. But, he noted, the only outlet in which ASCAP does not collect fees for use of music is theater, which is subject to other payment formulas.

Following lunch was the “Meet the Money” session, moderated in a return engagement by entertainment attorney Gordon P. Firemark, who had co-presented the previous day’s legal panel. With justification, ANMT’s schedule notes described the “Money” panel as “eye-opening.” Kensington Entertainment’s Michael Shapiro seemed to match one’s pre-conceived image of a theater producer and/or investor, as the ebullient white-haired gentleman regaled listeners with tales of the fabled Nederlanders, noting that opening shows in their own 1,232-seat Broadway house was a hedge against loss, because they were at least paid rent, even if a play
flopped. The musical money man also quoted bank robber Willie Sutton who, when asked why he robbed banks, responded: “Because that’s where the money is.” Shapiro, noting that unions have large pension funds that make investments, suggested that unions could be a source for investing in productions.

Meet the Money panel: Marco Gomez and Schoen Smith of Venture Hill Entertainment, Michael Shapiro of Kensington Entertainment and Murphy Cross of WetRock Entertainment

At the other end of the spectrum was Peach Reasoner, who due to circumstances beyond her control violated *The Producers*’ Max Bialystock’s “two cardinal rules of producing. One: Never put your own money in the show,” which, of course, is also rule number two. Although *Hoboken to Hollywood*, the award-winning big-band-themed musical Reasoner produced, had a long run in LA, she said she has yet to earn a profit from it. Reasoner also discussed the crowd-funding kickstarter.com website as a possible source of financing for musicals.

Tony- and Drama Desk-nominated Broadway producer Heather Provost seemed somewhere between these panelists, asserting that she “doesn’t ask investors to put their money into a show I wouldn’t.” The backers she has approached for dramas written by, among others, Neil LaBute, run “a wide gamut, from athletes to my brother’s stock market buddies,” said the trim transplanted New Yawker, who insisted that “the smallest investor should be treated like the biggest…. It’s all about relationships, be sociable. You gotta get out there and meet people,” Provost insisted, advocating a “schmooze or lose” philosophy.

The long-legged Schoen Smith and Marco Gomez, whose long locks are worthy of a Musketeer, cut a dashing pair on the stage as they discussed their Venture Hill Entertainment. According to its website, it’s a LLC and “private investment company created to enhance and develop theatre, film, music and television properties” — including a London production of *Driving Miss Daisy* with James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave, the Tony-nominated *Evita* featuring Ricky Martin, and closer to home, DOMA’s revival of the musical *Jekyll and Hyde* at Hollywood’s Met Theatre, directed by Gomez himself.

During the panel, in lightly-accented English, Gomez related that he was born into money, but his mother required him to attain his own wealth. He invests in shows that capture his whimsy. Smith is VHE’s producer and vice president of development, who apparently first came to Gomez’s attention when she was attached to the play *Elevator*, which she convinced him to back, against Gomez’s better judgment, and, he confessed, she proved him wrong. Gomez expressed a preference for “something I haven’t seen, something new. I’m not afraid to take risks.” Other “Meet the Money” panelists included *Divorce, The Musical* producer Rick Culbertson and independent producer Murphy Cross.
Meet the Entrepreneurs panel: Debbie Kasper and Pat Sierchio of "Boomermania"

The ensuing “Meet the Entrepreneurs” session reinforced the sense of the commercial side of theater, discussing the importance of self-producing, marketing and publicity. The panelists included the writers Michael Antin, who described himself as “an ex-tax accountant and self-funded playwright” of Sophia; Peter Colley, who wrote the book for Cagney! and lamented “The writer is the low man on the totem pole”; and former standup comics Debbie Kasper and Pat Sierchio, who share writer-producer credits for Boomermania, which had an eight-month run.

Write Act Repertory director/producer Anne Tamanaha Mesa, whose credits include producing the recent Geeks, stressed the significance of “finding a target audience” and expressed a “can-do” attitude, insisting “anything is possible and you can definitely produce it.” She noted that she had once presented a play for only $1,000 in expenses. Mesa was joined by StefanyNorthcutt, Write Act Repertory associate director of artistic development.

David Elzer of Demand PR, who had a background in the motion picture industry, represents a number of SoCal theatrical companies and venues including the Colony, Rubicon and San Diego Musical Theatre. Elzer is also a producer of award-winning shows, such as The Marvelous Wonderettes. Elzer urged the assembled aspiring writers to “Follow your heart, listen to your gut… I have gut instinct.” He also ballyhooed the key role staged readings can play in the development of a play and advised the aspiring scribes, “You want to market what’s most sellable about your play — not necessarily what your show is about…The title should tell what the show is about.”

Ken Werther brings 30 years’ worth of public relations in TV and theater to bear, and when this veteran press agent predicts the imminent demise of the print media, as Arthur Miller wrote regarding Willy Loman, attention must be paid. “All of the newspapers across the country have decimated their staffs,” Werther insisted. He noted the increasing role of the Internet vis-à-vis
print. In a similar online vein, Elzer added that “great websites with links to buying tickets and fabulous graphics” are vital for successful marketing of today’s productions.

Meet the Producers panel: Gregg Maday of Warner Bros. and Michael Jung of Disney

The conference’s grand finale was “Meet the Producers”, in which five producers read written pitches of the projects attendees were working on — and if available, listened to excerpted audio files. Venture’s Shoen Smith returned to the NoHo Arts Center’s stage with her colleagues Brian McDonald (Rubicon Theatre Company’s resident director), Michael Jung (Walt Disney Imagineering Creative Entertainment’s v.p. of theatrical development), Oanh Nguyen (Chance Theatre’s artistic director) and Gregg Maday (Warner Entertainment) to candidly comment on the strength and weaknesses of the submitted pitches at a rapid-fire pace in a veritable pitch-a-palooza. They considered pitches about the Tea Party, James Madison, space aliens, suffragettes, a US doctor in South America and much more, offering pointers.

Smith said she looked “for poetry in pitches that get to the heart, that strikes a chord,” and she recommended that period pieces “be made relevant to audiences today.” Maday advised using the phrase “in the tradition of” to help set the tone, conjuring up an image of previous plays that put a pitched show into context. Jung was “turned off when politics were more important than the human element” and pointed out that “ultimately, the opening lines are crucial to the experience” of considering pitches.

The conference offered its 60 or so attendees practical advice, specific outlets — venues, festivals, investors — to submit material to, advice on how to craft proposals and applications in professional ways, a sense of shared camaraderie and more.

Australian Kevin Purcell probably traveled the farthest in order to take part in the conference, all the way from Melbourne to North Hollywood. When asked if it was worth the expense in terms of fees, airfare, hotels and more, the Aussie gushed: “I got my money’s worth many times over.”

Shakespeare never wrote a single musical, but had he attended this exhaustive three-day marathon, Hamlet and Ophelia just might have warbled a few toe-tapping duets.
For more information about ANMT’s Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz Conference for Musical Theatre Writers, go to www.anmt.org/conference.asp.