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THEATER

THEATER; Where Do Musicals Come From?

By ALVIN KLEIN

THIS is the time for singing about musicals. Given a blitz of "Oklahoma!" nostalgia, it is difficult to avoid knowing that the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic opened on Broadway 50 years ago -- last Wednesday to the day. Another yearlong observance marks the centennial of Broadway itself, the theater district that has been traditionally defined by musicals.

Add four new-issue stamps by the United States Postal Service, commemorating musical milestones -- "Showboat," "Porgy and Bess," "My Fair Lady," in addition to "Oklahoma!" -- and it's clear that a celebration of musicals, old musicals, is in the air.

But where are the new ones? That's a question on the minds of everyone bothered by the current Broadway season's musical drought and worried about the future of America's most popular theater form.

The Stamford Center for the Arts may have an answer. Beginning April 12 and for each Monday thereafter through May 24, staged readings of new, or relatively new, musicals are to be held at the Rich Forum.

The staged readings are an outgrowth of Musical Theater Works, a Manhattan-based development center for musicals, founded by Anthony J. Stimac 10 years ago. Now at its fourth site, on Lafayette Street in lower Manhattan, the organization has mounted 35 full productions and 158 staged readings of musicals. No Costumes or Props

"The old way of taking a show out of town, like 'Oklahoma!' in New Haven, is no longer financially viable," Mr. Stimac said. Instead, informal readings and staged readings are held. The next step in a musical's development is a workshop production that enables collaborators to make revisions depending on audience reactions and professional feedback.

The idea of the readings came to Margot Hartman Tenney and Del Tenney, Greenwich residents, who founded and ran the now-defunct Hartman Theater Company in Stamford from 1974 through 1980.

Alexander H. Cohen, the executive producer of the center, they recalled, asked them, "What would

you like to do for our subscribers on Monday nights?" Just as Mrs. Tenney herself was asking, "Is there an audience for new musicals in the community?" And she saw the chance to find out. "Tony has the process going, Alex has the theater; let's do it," she recalled saying.

By the rules of Actors Equity, 20 hours of rehearsals are allowed for staged readings, but no choreography, no costumes and no props. The complete script and score are performed by professional actors.

The musicals in the series are in various stages of development. Some have had staged readings elsewhere, but none appear as read, and one might say as ready as "Abyssinia," which has had four fully staged productions already, including two at the Norma Terris-Goodspeed at Chester in 1987 and 1988. It was once close to a Broadway production until negotiations fell through.

A varied lot, the musicals have scores that range from rock and rap ("The Common Thread") to high-style musical theater sounds ("Quality Street").

"We're hoping 750 people a night will come to these -- and maybe next fall, the series will expand to workshop productions and then to a full production or two, so that musicals will sing in Stamford," Mr. Stimac said.

Injecting a note of skepticism, Mrs. Tenney said: "Yes, it is a step forward toward developing new American musicals, but is that going to be a problem? Are the audiences here willing to take a chance on something new? Or will they stay away because it's free?"

The Hartman/Tenney Series of staged readings of new musicals at the Truglia Theater in the Rich Forum (307 Atlantic Street, Stamford; 325-4466). Capacity: 757. Admission is free with priority given to the theater's subscribers.

April 12: "Girl of My Dreams" by Peter Ekstrom, Steve Hayes and Paul Shelley; directed by Anthony J. Stimac. A musical about an actress and the two men in her life during World War II.

April 19: "Brimstone" by Mary Bracken Phillips, Keith Donald and Andy Wilder; directed by Julianne Boyd. A musical about escape, terrorism and love during the unrest in Belfast.

April 26: "Internal Combustion" by Georgia Holof and David Mettee; directed by Mr. Stimac. A musical about America's love affair with the automobile from 1900 through modern times.

May 3: "Quality Street" by Roger Anderson and Lee Goldsmith, based on the play by J. M. Barrie; directed by Vivian Matalon.

May 10: "Raising Arizona" by Eric Stern and David Boles; directed by Lonny Price. A musical version of the motion picture of the same name.

May 17: "Abyssinia" by James Racheff and Ted Kociolek; directed by Jack Hofsiss. A musical set in a black community in Oklahoma at the turn of the century.

May 24: "The Common Thread," an expansion of a one-hour musical developed by young people in a group home in the South Bronx.

Photo: Frank D. Rich Jr., left, president of Stamford Center for the Arts, with Margot Hartman Tenny and Del Tenney, right, trustees, and Anthony J. Stimac of Musical Theater Works.

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