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STAGE TO SCREEN: The New York Musical Theatre Festival

By *Eric Grode*
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The New York Musical Theatre Festival has a lot more to offer than just the film series.

When all is said and done, the festival — which runs Sept. 13 to Oct. 3 throughout Midtown Manhattan — will feature more than 280 performances of 67 musicals. But movie buffs will have their own abundance of options, courtesy of a four-day binge at the AMC 25-plex in Times Square.

From cult hits (“Hedwig and the Angry Inch,” “Neil Young’s Greendale”) to big names (Beyonce in “MTV’s Hip-Hopera Carmen,” Bjork in “Dancer in the Dark”), from Bollywood fare to “Deliverance: The Musical,” you should find plenty to keep you occupied from Sept. 27 to 30. “There is a film for everyone in this festival,” promises Elizabeth Lucas, founding producer of the NYMF film division. “The whole festival is about new ways to approach musicals, and I wanted the film series to reflect that. It’s pioneer territory. There are no rules right now.”

Lucas handpicked the entire slate after tracking down what she sincerely believes to be every movie musical made in the last seven years. All but four of the full-length films are paired with shorts, about half of the screenings will feature Q&As, and two programs are devoted entirely to shorter works. Among the choice offerings:

- “Temptation,” a rock setting of the Faust legend, will get its world premiere on opening night. “This will be the big one,” predicts Lucas, who says the post-screening party will likely include an open mike for Michael Cerveris, Alice Ripley, Anika Noni Rose, Adam Pascal, Deven May, Annie Golden and the rest of the cast.
- The ubiquitous Rick McKay will screen “Broadway: The Golden Age” on Sept. 28. Look for some extra footage and, I suspect, a Q&A with a few legends from the film.
- Raw Impressions always promises a smattering of cool stuff: It was one of the first groups to throw people together and see what they can create in a very limited space of time. Its Sept. 28 program includes seven short films shot within 16 days, including performances by Tonya Pinkins, Kate Shindle and Julia Murney.

With the possible exception of “Dancer in the Dark,” the films being screened

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all have moderate to tiny budgets. The recent mini-surge of big-budget movie musicals may ultimately have a trickle-down effect on smaller musicals, but it hasn't happened yet.

"The goal is to kind of demystify the whole notion of the movie musical," Lucas says. "There is a phobia about that phrase in Hollywood, but nothing better has come along." (She clearly has a vested interest in seeing this happen: Three of her own shorts are screening in the festival, and she has two full-length movie musicals in development, including an adaptation of Michael John LaChiusa's "Little Fish.")

So when does that stigma go away? When does the system change such that an indie musical gets made as quickly as, say, an indie coming-of-age drama? "It changes when someone with the money or the greenlight power decides to change it," says Lucas, who refers to the overall festival as "a gigantic marketing platform." The festival is doing its bit to speed that process along, including a panel discussion that will include representatives from VH1, Miramax and other heavy hitters.

For information on the film series or the rest of NYMF (including the television component at the Museum of Television & Radio, which includes screenings of "Evening Primrose" and "Bloomer Girl"), go to www.nymf.org.

With the news that New Line hopes to film "Hairspray" in time for a 2006 release, co-directed by Jack O'Brien and Jerry Mitchell, it now appears that we'll have at least four major musical adaptations in five years: "Chicago" in 2002, "Phantom of the Opera" this year, "The Producers" slated for 2005 and now "Hairspray." Regardless of what happens with "Rent," "Contact," "Damn Yankees," "Pippin," "Little Fish" (see above), "Forever Plaid" and "Bye Bye Birdie," that's a pretty serious commitment of time and money into movie musicals. Glad to have them back.

The New Yorker Festival is always one of the highlights of the fall, featuring everything from a concert by the bands in "A Mighty Wind" to a discussion with Julie Taymor that included lengthy clips of her then-in-the-works "Frida." This year's festival schedule has just been announced, and New Yorker theatre critic John Lahr has two offerings on Oct. 2 that should appeal to readers of this column. The starrier session is "The Method," a panel discussion on acting on stage and on screen with Ed Norton, Cynthia Nixon, Stockard Channing and Stanley Tucci. But I'm personally more interested in a one-on-one discussion with former Royal National Theatre head Richard Eyre, who also directed "Stage Beauty." Seeing as the film opens two weeks later, I think it's a safe bet that Eyre will have a few clips to show.

The Mob-meets-the-movie-biz comedy "The Last Shot," which opens Sept. 24, features actors from both of the upcoming Roundabout Theatre productions: Matthew Broderick (*The Foreigner*) stars, while James Rebhorn (*Twelve Angry Men*) has a supporting role. Throw in Alec Baldwin, who had the lead in last year's *Twentieth Century*, and Calista Flockhart, who did *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Three Sisters*, and you've got a full-fledged Roundabout reunion.

Also opening Sept. 24 is "A Dirty Shame," John Waters' self-described "cunnilingus concussion comedy." (No guarantees about *where* it's opening: Waters is apparently having some difficulties squeaking past the ratings board with anything milder than an NC-17 rating, which severely restricts

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the number of theatres to show it and newspapers to advertise it.) Waters, who's developing a *Cry-Baby* musical to go along with the smash *Hairspray*, has plucked Jackie Hoffman from her scene stealing duties in the latter musical to perform similar duties in "Dirty Shame." The film also stars Tracey Ullman and Suzanne Shepherd, who has had several high-profile stints directing the works of Athol Fugard. Shepherd is best known these days for her work as Carmela's mother on "The Sopranos"; her on-screen husband is Tom Aldredge, who's about to start performances in *Twelve Angry Men* with Rebhorn and ten other angry guys.

Beyond that, look for Steven Berkoff in the period romance "Head in the Clouds" (Sept. 17) and Alan King in his final film appearance in "Mind the Gap" (Sept. 24). And "The Motorcycle Diaries" (Sept. 24), which focuses on Che Guevara's days as a young medical student, features a screenplay by playwright Jose Rivera (*Cloud Tectonics*).

Your Thoughts: The news that Michael Gambon has a smallish role in the new sci-fi action flick "Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow" (Sept. 17) got me thinking about Hollywood's love for putting big-deal Brits into megabudget fantasy films. Every "Harry Potter" and "Lord of the Rings" movie is stuffed with Dames and Sirs. So here's my question: When and how did all this start? I think of Alec Guinness lending his weary gravitas to "Star Wars" as the first case of this, but I suspect there are earlier examples out there. Who can help me out?

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