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Needed, More Positive Gay Theatre

By Steven Madison
Q-Notes Staff

Something very unusual happened recently as I viewed the national touring company of "Cats" at Ovens Auditorium. For the uninitiated, "Cats" is a musical adaptation of T.S. Elliott's book "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." At the show's end, we're informed (as if we hadn't thought about it earlier) that the world of cats is much like the world of people: full of the good and the bad, the silly and the serious, the old and the young; all trying to eke out a daily existence.

But why, I wondered as I sat there, aren't there any gay cats in Elliott's world? There certainly should have been, if, as Elliott wanted us to imagine, the world of cats is very much like the world of humans. And, had either Elliott in his original work or the originators of the London and Broadway adaptations thought about such an obvious omission, this sellout Broadway smash for the last six years could have been hammering away that gays are all around and trying to get through the day pretty much like everyone else.

Unfortunately for our cause, the Broadway musical theater, which the gay world has played a fundamental role in fashioning, hasn't done much in the way of validating the homosexual. One can count on one hand the Broadway musicals in which gay characters or their stories have played an important part.

"La Cage aux Folles," of course, must rank as the preeminent gay musical theater

smash. As a popular entertainment, "La Cage" played over 1,800 performances, each of them driving home the point that "we are what we are," with no excuses offered or required. With several of its creators understanding the nature of the homosexual to their very bones, no other musical written for the commercial theater approaches the message of "La Cage."

Everyone familiar with musical theater would be certain to mention the two acknowledged gay characters in "A Chorus Line." But, how positive are those role models? Paul, who had been a chorus dancer in sleazy drag shows, injures himself before the final selection is made, and Greg, upper East Side though he be, isn't among the chosen eight in the final elimination.

"Applause," the musical version of the film "All About Eve," replaced the Thelma Ritter character from the original with a gay dresser/confidant for stage star Margo Channing. Basically, though, his major impetus in the play is to take Margo to a gay bar so she can dance with the boys for the show's first production number "But Alive."

And that's it! Three plays (all set, incidentally, in the world of show business) make up the entire repertoire of gay mainstream musical theater. To be fair, off-Broadway has provided other illuminating gay musicals: "Boy Meets Boy," "March of the Falsettos," "The Faggot," "Wonderful Lives!" and most recently "The Ten Per Cent Revue." Still, the musical theater seems an artistic area just ripe for some gay revelation.

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