

## DOIN' IT FOR SUGAR

Sometimes timing is everything. If, for example, *Sugar*, a musical based on a beloved film comedy, with two great male starring roles, directed by an amazing director/choreographer, had opened not in April 1972 but in April 2001, the year another musical based on a beloved film comedy, with two great male starring roles, directed by an amazing director/choreographer, my guess is it would have been a smash hit and run for a very long time. But *The Producers* had the timing and *Sugar* didn't.

*Sugar* had the misfortune to open at a time when the musical theater was going through great change – as Time magazine critic T.E. Kalem put it in his review of *Sugar*: “*Sugar* is almost a textbook case of a musical born after its time. It may well enjoy great wads of audience favor. But in the past three years *Company* and *Follies* have altered the critical perspective by providing a musical form that is spare, intelligent, ironic, mature and capable of sustaining three-dimensional characters.” By 2001, audiences, after years of spare, intelligent, ironic, mature musicals, were ready, willing, and more than able to embrace on old-fashioned nothing-on-its-mind-but-laughs-and-entertainment musical like *The Producers*. But in 1972, *Sugar*, despite its non-stop hilarity and tuneful Jule Styne/Bob Merrill songs, seemed like a bit of a dinosaur, at least to critics.

But the fact is, despite the critics, the show managed a decent run of 505 performances at the Majestic Theater, even turning a small profit. Unlike *The Producers*, however, the birth of *Sugar* was anything but easy. After the success of *Promises, Promises*, adapted from Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond's hit film *The Apartment*, David Merrick, who'd produced *Promises*, thought he would strike even bigger box-office gold by adapting their even bigger hit *Some Like It Hot* as a musical. There was only one problem: The Mirisch Company owned the rights and would not make a deal. Merrick, however, had purchased the rights to the underlying material from which Wilder and Diamond had adapted *Some Like It Hot*, the German film *Fanfare der Liebe*. At that point, Merrick hired his *Hello, Dolly!* team to do the adaptation – Jerry Herman and Michael Stewart, along with *Dolly's* director / choreographer Gower Champion. Although Merrick was still pursuing the *Some Like It*

*Hot* rights, Herman and Stewart proceeded using the *Fanfare der Liebe* source material only. At that point, the show was titled *One of the Girls*. The time frame was moved to the 1940s and in that version there was little resembling *Some Like It Hot* and Merrick was especially annoyed and unhappy, and when Merrick was especially annoyed and unhappy it was especially unpleasant to be on the creative team. Herman and Stewart resigned and then, magically, somehow Merrick finally snagged the rights to the *Hot* screenplay.

The title was changed to *Nobody's Perfect* (in honor of the film's classic final line), and writer George Axelrod was brought on to do the book. Axelrod had written such hits as *The Seven Year Itch* (which Wilder had turned into a hit film), *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter*, and the iconic films *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. For the score, Merrick got Jule Styne and Bob Merrill, who'd worked together on *Funny Girl*, and had just worked with Gower Champion on the disastrous musical, *Prettybelle*, which had just closed out of town without ever reaching Broadway. That hadn't been a happy experience for any of them, but they decided to go ahead with the new show because, frankly, they all needed a hit.

For whatever reasons, Champion and Axelrod also veered too far from *Some Like It Hot*, and Champion, realizing they'd gone in directions they shouldn't have, prevailed upon Peter Stone to come in and help. Stone read what they'd done and said, “Why try to improve on what's already terrific?” And with that, Axelrod left the project and Stone wrote a new book, now entitled *Sugar*, and one that was mostly very faithful to *Some Like It Hot*, because Stone knew that audiences would want to see all their favorite moments from the film. They assembled their cast, led by Robert Morse and Tony Roberts – newcomer Elaine Joyce was signed to play the title role, the part that Marilyn Monroe had made magic of in the film. Johnny Desmond was hired to play gangster Spats Palazzo, the part played by George Raft in the original movie.

The show was to have its initial tryout at the Kennedy Center's Opera House. Alvin Colt was doing the costumes, and Jo Mielziner the set. And when the creative team saw that set – which was brown – all hell broke loose. As Peter Stone remembered: “You have to understand that Gower worked in utter secrecy and no one saw the drawings for the set. But the set goes up at the Kennedy Center, and it's terribly unattrac-

tive and drab. We all looked on in astonishment and said, ‘How can you be funny on a brown set. How do you get light and happy on a brown set?’” And so Jo Mielziner was out and Robin Wagner was in.

The show opened, reviews were tepid, songs came and went, characters came and went, and Champion and company worked on the show while they played the show at night. At one of the rehearsals, Bert Michaels, who was assisting Champion, came up with the brilliant idea that Spats Palazzo should tap like a machine gun. Champion grabbed at the idea and Johnny Desmond was soon replaced by specialty tap dancer Steve Condos. Merrick became a terror to everyone, bringing in Neil Simon, who wrote a few scenes that were never used, bringing in the entire writing staff of *Laugh-In* so that Stone could see them sitting there, and Champion tried to bring back Jerry Herman to help. In the end, none of them did, although the creative team received many comments and hints from directors like Robert Moore (*Promises, Promises*), and choreographers like Donald Saddler. The show moved to Toronto (two of the show's best songs, “Sun On My Face” and “Hey, Why Not?” were still not in the show when critic/writer Peter Filichia saw it there), then to Boston, where more changes were made, more hysteria ensued, the show got better, and audiences were, through it all, responding well.

The show came into New York and after a few previews, opened on April 9th. The reviews were mixed – with many critics calling it a hodge-podge, old-fashioned, but with some having to admit that it was fast-paced, funny, and unassuming. The book was deemed clunky and the score uninspired. And maybe it seemed that way back then. Now, it seems a model of musical comedy craftsmanship, with incredibly tuneful music (the kind they don't know how to write anymore), and lyrics, whatever one may think of them, craft-wise, that get laugh after laugh (I know this because someone sent me a copy of a complete performance of the show on CD and the laughs for book and lyrics are so huge, so long, so loud, and come so often that there's nothing in today's musical theater that can touch it, save for aforementioned *The Producers*). The show received Tony nominations for Best Musical, Best Actor in a Musical (Robert Morse), and Best Choreography and Direction nominations for Gower Champion. It went home empty-handed, losing its awards to *A Little Night Music* and *Pippin*.

From the first notes of the overture you know it's a Jule Styne score – and what an overture it is, classic Styne all the way, with great tunes, one after another, all orchestrated by the wonderful Philip J. Lang. The songs are clever and fun and occasionally laugh out loud funny. The fact the score did not receive a Tony nomination is a little shocking (the four nominations that year were Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*, Stephen Schwartz's *Pippin*, Micki Grant's *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, and Peter Link's incidental music to Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*).

A year after the show closed on Broadway, *Sugar* was produced for the Civic Light Opera in Los Angeles at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, with Champion's direction and choreography recreated by Cyril Ritchard and Denny Martin Flinn. The show starred Robert Morse (reprising his role) and Larry Kert, Leland Palmer (a delectable Sugar), and Cyril Ritchard (also reprising his role). However, Ritchard suffered a heart attack early on and was replaced by Gale Gordon. I saw that production and it was wonderful – screamingly funny, with those hummable Styne/Merrill songs, brilliant choreography and direction, and stellar performances. The audience ate it up. The show was slightly revised for Los Angeles, with five additional songs — “See You Around,” “Nice Ways,” “Don't Be Afriad,” “I'm Engaged,” and “People In My Life.”

Years later, there was a production in England starring Tommy Steele – that production used *Some Like It Hot* as its title, and changed around the order of the songs. In recent years, there was a tour (again using the *Some Like It Hot* title) with the film's Tony Curtis playing millionaire Osgood Fielding, Jr. The show would seem ripe for a great revival – you just have to find a cast as good as the original, along with a director / choreographer who is as inventive and brilliant as Gower Champion – these days, a somewhat tall order, but if it were done right, *Sugar* might just prove to be a sweet success.

*Sugar* was originally released on United Artists records. It was then issued on CD in 1999 by Ryko. When I decided to reissue it (since the Ryko is long out of print and bringing fairly high prices), I had all the tapes pulled from the MGM vaults. As was the case with *Promises, Promises*, the first thing I found was that the Ryko version was not the original album mix, but a remix that simply attempted to ape the original album

mix. The original album masters were there, too, along with all the sixteen-track session tapes. I had no intention of doing anything but putting out the original album mix for the first time on CD. We put up those tapes and while they were in excellent condition I just couldn't believe how much swimmy, washy reverb was used on that original mix (on the CD released by Ryko). It was the fashion back then, but this was much heavier reverb than any other cast recording I'd ever heard. It robbed the orchestra of detail and the vocals sounded like they were in a huge garage. That was kind of a trademark sound that the album's producer, Mitch Miller, favored for his Columbia albums with the Mitch Miller Singers.

So, just for fun, I'd brought one reel of the sixteen-track session tapes. We put that on the machine and what issued forth was an incredible-sounding recording – the raw recording, with no reverb at all. Yes, it was dry, and yes it needed some space added, but the recording itself and the way the band and performers sounded was so crystal clear and beautiful and brassy that it took me no more than five seconds to realize that I wanted to do what we did with *Promises*, and offer an alternate new mix along with the original album mix.

Remixing this score was a particular joy because I'm such a fan of the score and the show. During the mix, I was suddenly hearing wonderful orchestral details I'd never heard before – we placed the instruments a little differently in the soundstage for optimum clarity, and the vocals suddenly sounded much more present and they were no longer occasionally getting beaten up by the band the way they were in the original. It must be remembered always that cast albums were recorded in a day (the first day off after opening), mixed quickly, and in the stores within a week. And mixing quickly from sixteen tracks (most likely in a single day) is never going to result in an optimal-sounding product. *Sugar's* original mix was fine for a quickly done cast recording, but even casual listeners have remarked to me that they notice the incredible amount of reverb and how it mars the recording for them (believe me, I canvassed opinion). So I hope it will be fun to hear this alternate mix with a lot less artificial processing – for me, at least, it gives the score a whole new vibrancy and vitality.

I wish we could say we found some fun bonus material, but the album was carefully thought out by Jule Styne and Bob Merrill. For instance, “Tear the Town Apart” a num-

ber for Spats Palazzo and his cohorts, that consists mostly of staccato tapping against percussion, wasn't recorded because, according to reports, Styne didn't care for it (it was something that Champion had insisted on for the show). In the show, “Beautiful Through and Through” does not have “Magic Nights” interpolated – the latter is a standalone song, but one that has no real ending, so the solution to marry the songs for the album works beautifully. The overture has an ending not present in the show – in the show, the overture's final song is “November Song,” which then leads directly into the show's first musical moment, a number by Sweet Sue and the Society Syncopaters, which also does not appear on the album.

So, here is *Sugar* – the original LP mix on CD for the first time, and our new remix for those who might be interested. I've been walking around for weeks humming these irresistible songs, and I'll bet some of you will be, too.

— Bruce Kimmel