

L.A. NOW AND THEN — A New Musical Revue

This is the city. Los Angeles, California. And this is *L.A. Now and Then*, a new musical revue about the City of Angels, the city that was and the city that is.

In mid-2015 I was approached about directing a musical at my alma mater, Los Angeles City College. I've gone back there throughout the years to do both new musicals and classics, most recently in 2014 with my critically acclaimed production of *Li'l Abner*. Prior to that, I'd done an original musical revue, *Lost and Unsung*, which was based on my series of CDs called *Lost in Boston* and *Unsung Musicals*, and prior to that I'd done my original musical (written with David Wechter), *The Brain from Planet X*, which has gone on to have a successful life in stock and amateur productions all over the world.

As I began to think about what I might like to direct, Les Ferreira, the new chairman of the Theatre Academy suggested I do an original. I went home and thought about it – what would it be, what would be interesting to create? I really had no idea. But I happened to have just gotten a wonderful book by artist and photographer Ed Ruscha called *Then and Now – Hollywood Boulevard 1973-2004*. Ruscha had photographed the entirety of Hollywood Boulevard (both sides) in 1973 and then done so again in 2004. There was something incredibly moving as I perused both sides of the book, the then and now (circa 2004). And I began to think about L.A. – the then and now of it and I instantly knew that I wanted that to be the show I'd create. I'm an L.A. native, all sixteen of the books I've written take place in Los Angeles, and I'm L.A. down to my core. I've lived here all my life, and I've seen the changes, bad and good, that this city is constantly going through. I've seen the disrespect it constantly shows to what made it singular and classic in the first place. I've seen the amazing melting pot it's become. I've seen classic buildings torn down and replaced by monstrosities. I've seen my childhood haunts demolished and destroyed. And I've seen what's survived, what's lasted, what's still here in all its glory. It just seemed like a wonderfully colorful idea for a new musical revue, a form of entertainment that has mostly gone the way of the dodo bird. So, it was appealing to me on all those levels.

I decided right off the bat that I did not want to write all of it by myself. I wanted different voices, different attitudes and points of view. My only rule is that the other writers I approached had to have lived here for a long time. The first person I went to was my pal, the hilarious Bruce Vilanch. He came on board instantly to write a sketch. The second person I went to was Richard M. Sherman of The Sherman Brothers. He came on board instantly, too. Then I went to songwriters Adryan Russ, Shelly Markham, and Michele Brouman, and they were all excited about it and wanted to contribute. I went

to Paul Gordon, the composer/lyricist of the musicals *Jane Eyre* and *Daddy Long Legs* – he'd actually gone to LACC so that was perfect and he happily said yes. Of course I went to my frequent writing partner David Wechter for a few sketches. And I went to Doug Haverty, a playwright who also happens to be a graphic designer who's designed every Kritzerland CD. And others like Wayne Moore and the great guitarist Grant Geissman, who also wanted to contribute.

The first song I wrote was "C.C. Brown's," my most missed place since it closed its doors in 1996, ninety years after it first opened its doors. Then I wrote the opening number, because I knew that would guide everyone in understanding the tone I wanted for the show. And from there I wrote "Sunset Strip 1965" – I had and have no idea where that song came from in me, but it was another role model for what I wanted the show to be. Slowly, and I do mean slowly, the other songs came in. I'd asked certain writers to write specific things – I knew I wanted a song about The Black Dahlia, for example. And I knew I wanted Richard Sherman to write about how it was at the Disney Studios in the 60s, during his heyday there. I also knew I wanted something about the gay experience in LA from the early 60s to now and after offering that to any number of writers and not having any of them show any interest whatsoever, I finally insisted that Doug Haverty write it and as it turned out he was an inspired choice for it and what he delivered was beautiful. I hired my friend and long-time collaborator Lanny Meyers to orchestrate, and brought Richard Allen on to be our musical director.

So, 2016 rolled around and I had some but not all of the material. I'd written several more songs and a monologue about the Pan Pacific Auditorium. In March, I began to assemble what I had, into a very rough form of a show. Luckily, I had the opening number, the act one closer, and I knew how I wanted act two to end, so that was good. Finally by mid-March I pretty much had everything, material-wise, and I continued trying to make sense of all that in terms of how it would be structured in the show, so that the show would always be going somewhere new and surprising. We did a private reading at my house of my first attempt. Act one seemed to almost work well, but act two was kind of a disaster and way too long. I made several substantial cuts, removing material that just wasn't working. I came up with a new act two structure, added one song to open the act, then we did a second private reading at my house. Act one was working really well, but act two still stubbornly refused to come to life in the way I wanted. It was much trickier than the first act. I cut another song that wasn't working at all, and I re-ordered the act again. The song about The Black Dahlia was not right at that point and certainly not landing in the way I knew it had

to, but I wasn't ready to give up on it. I asked the lyricist, Adryan Russ, to do a fifth version of it – we talked for hours about the tone of it and what it really had to be about, and she sent me back another pass that was finally on the right road. We made a lot of adjustments to it, honing, cutting, focusing and in the end it really told the story just as I'd imagined it. At that point, I wrote the music for it (I was not the original composer), because I just knew what I wanted it to sound like and we were frankly out of time.

In April, we went into rehearsal. I'd brought in one alumnus of the school and one professional actor, and the rest of the cast was comprised of students of the Theatre Academy, a great bunch of kids, many of whom had not done a musical or even sung or danced in a show. But I like that challenge, and they all came through wonderfully and were really fun to work with. My choreographer, Cheryl Baxter, really put them through their paces, but they loved learning and doing and by the end of it, they were really great, each and every one of them. It was incredibly gratifying and satisfying to watch that happen. As we began run-throughs I knew act two was still behaving like a spoiled, obstinate child, refusing to work. I tried it five different ways, and still it would not behave and work – and it was still too long. Finally, I made one big cut and reordered the act yet again, just five days before we opened, and this time, finally, mercifully, it came to life in just the right way.

We opened, and had a completely sold out run. The word of mouth was great, people heard about it and they came. Interestingly, even people who weren't born here and didn't know all the stuff we were singing and talking about, still loved it, learning things they never knew. It made people laugh and it moved them. We got great reviews, too. I'd decided to record the show live rather than take everyone in the studio – I just wanted that "live" feeling, and I think that was the right choice and we hope you'll agree.

And so, here's our love letter to Los Angeles – a frustrating, crazy, wonderful, wacky, weird, wild and completely nutty and unique city. And we hope you'll get a sense of that. Of course, we wish you could see it in action – the great dancing, the wonderful set and projections and lighting. To that end, we've included a lot of photos to give you the feeling of what we did.

—Bruce Kimmel