



# Got Game?

## (Or: Adventures in the Quiz Show Trade)

by Clay Zambo

**Editor's note:** *When a Very Special Guest Contributor promised to deliver a Very Special Feature for this issue upon returning from vacation—and then didn't—it proved the blessing in disguise that allowed me to bump Clay Zambo's piece into lead position. It's an "off-topic" one to be sure, but when I learned that the charming and terrifically talented Mr. Zambo had been a contestant on ABC-TV's "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" I couldn't resist asking him to chronicle his experiences as One of Our Own having an interesting adventure in popular culture. "Okey-dokes," said Clay—and when I next heard from him, a few days hence, the following splendid, funny—and even somewhat touching—article was delivered. E-mailed from the local Kinko's. Local, that is, to where he and his wife were on vacation.*

*And that, ladies and gentlemen is the stuff of which Very Special Guest Contributors are really made...*

Let's start with an admission: I'm a game-show junkie. My habit isn't as bad as some have it—I'm

not the guy who posts Internet summaries of every day's episode of *The Price Is Right*—but if you want to watch the premiere of *Match Game '73* (where the questions weren't all dirty jokes) or the pilot of *Let's Make a Deal* (before everyone dressed up as a chicken

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or a banana), come on over some time—or perhaps I should say, “Come on down!”

Another confession. I wasn't home when *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* premiered, but my loving wife taped it for me. After I watched the tape, she asked if I wanted to file it with my collection. “Nah,” I said. “It'll never last.”

*For those who've been under a rock for the last 17 months, an oversimplistic summary may be in order. Millionaire is an hour-long prime-time quiz show that's been in the top 10 of the Nielsen ratings ever since its premiere. The game is pretty simple: 10 contestants compete to be the first to answer a question by placing four possible answers in the correct order—something like, “Put these US Presidents in order of their inauguration.” The winner comes center stage to answer a series of multiple-choice questions; the more correct answers, the more money won. Three “Lifelines” are available to help: “Ask the Audience,” returns a chart of percentages showing which answer the studio audience thinks is right; “50-50” removes two incorrect answers from the list of choices; “Phone-a-Friend” entitles the player to 30 seconds of telephone time with someone the player thinks might be helpful. Any incorrect answer ends the game, but the player may stop at any point—even after hearing a question—and retire with his or her winnings. That's it.*

Despite my predictions for its quick demise, I phoned the 900-number through which prospec-

tive contestants had 10 seconds to answer each of three “put-these-items-in-order” questions. I missed a question, and that was that. But then ABC picked the show up for another two-week run during November sweeps. And then picked it up as a continuing series. And somewhere in there, changed the 900-number to a toll-free call, and I was, like oodles of others, hooked.

On Thanksgiving night, after the leftovers were stored and the dishes washed, I made my nightly 800-number call. When the third question, always the toughest, was “Put these musicals in order of their premiere,” I started to have a good feeling. Having answered all three questions correctly, I was prompted to choose a date on which I'd be available for a taping of the TV show. I recited my name and city of residence slowly (spelling my last name, as requested), and entered the telephone number where I could be reached the following afternoon. (All correct answerers who choose the same tape date are entered into a drawing from which 40 are chosen as semi-finalists.)

We had planned an overnight nickel-slots-playing junket to Atlantic City, so I gave the computer my cell-phone's number. And remembered to charge the phone's battery. And to take the phone with me on the trip. And to have it turned on. (I'd erred in many ways on previous qualifying attempts.) I checked the phone

*(Continued on page 9)*

# Works

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## In Production

### THE DEVIL'S MUSIC

The Melting Pot Theatre production of the award-winning play about blues singer **Bessie Smith**, written by **Angelo Parra** (Librettists), opens for a limited engagement from **January 24 and through March 4** at **Theatre Three, 311 West 43rd Street**, just off Eighth Avenue. Performances are Wednesday through Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets can be purchased through Ticket Central, (212) 279-4200, 1:00 to 8:00 p.m., and are available at \$25, **\$10 off the regular price by mentioning code MPTDM**. Information on group rates can be obtained by calling **(212) 874-7210**. (For more information, see **Members in the News**.)

### FERDINAND THE BULL

Music and lyrics by **Jeff Marx** and **Robert Lopez** (both Advanced), book and direction by **Rob Barron** (non-member), produced by **Theatreworks/USA**, had its workshop performances for invited audiences in mid-October. This will be followed by a Spring 2001 mini-tour (a tryout in local venues) and a full cross-country tour in the Fall. Marx and Lopez, best known in the Workshop for their satirical, self-described "Sesame Street" for twentysomethings, "**Avenue Q**" (currently being prepared for off-Broadway),

were co-winners of the **2000 Kleban Award** for lyrics; and Barron was director-librettist for the award-winning TW/USA versions of "**The Phantom of the Opera**" and "**Les Misérables**," both in collaboration with composer-lyricist **David Spencer** (Committee and also a 2000 Kleban co-winner).

### HOW TO INSULT YOUR TRUE LOVE

A musical based on **Anton Chekhov's "The Marriage Proposal,"** music and lyrics by **Burton Sternthal** (Advanced), book by Sternthal and **Susan Saltiel** (non-member), received 6 performances in the second annual **Chekhov Now Festival** at the Connelly Theatre (220 E. 4th St) in mid-November. The director was **Howard Berkowitz** and the cast members were **Nina Fine**, **John**

#### **BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop**

**320 West 57th Street  
New York, NY 10019**

Jean Banks – Senior Director

#### **Steering Committee**

Patrick Cook  
Richard Engquist  
Frank Evans  
Nancy Golladay  
Annette Leisten  
Alan Menken  
Susan H. Schulman  
Jane Smulyan  
David Spencer  
Maury Yeston

**Gaffney** and **Arthur McKenzie** . Log onto [www.chekhovnow.org](http://www.chekhovnow.org) for more information.

## RED HOLLOW

a supernatural screenplay by **Philip De Blasi** (composer, Advanced) has been sold to producer **Arnold Kopelson** ("Platoon", "The Fugitive", "Seven"). and is on the fast track to production. **De Blasi** is currently writing music and libretto for musical thriller "Frankenstein" with lyricist **Jane Landers** (Advanced).

## In Progress

### DR. SEX

Composer/lyricist **Larry Bortniker** (Advanced) will be presenting five staged readings of his musical sex comedy about **Alfred C. Kinsey** and the making of the Kinsey Report; co-librettist is **Sally Deering** (non-member). The free readings will be held on **Monday, January 22, 29** and **February 5**, at the **Chelsea Studios (151 W. 26, 6th Floor)** and **Friday, February 16** and **Monday, February 19** at the **Manhattan Theatre Club (311 W. 43, 8th Floor)**. All performances will start at **7 p.m.** For reservations, call **(201) 792-1235**.

## And the Winner Is...

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### ABIE'S ISLAND ROSE

After completing its engagement in **Hollywood, Florida** at the

**Hollywood Playhouse**, the new musical with music by **Doug Katsaros**, book by **Ron Sproat** (both alumni), plus lyrics by second year moderator **Richard Engquist** and **Frank Evans** (both committee) was ranked fifth in the year-end Ten Best Plays list by **Hap Erstein** in *The Palm Beach Post*. The musical—about a Jewish student who can't get accepted into med school in the states, goes to the Caribbean for his education and meets and marries a beautiful island girl, causing cultural consternation expressed by his mother and her father—made its debut last season in New York City as a production of the **Jewish Repertory Theatre** at **Playhouse 91**.

## Opening Doors

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### NEW "BEFORE BROADWAY" READING SERIES, EXCLUSIVE TO BMI WORKSHOP MEMBERS

In cooperation with BMI, the **Algonquin Arts Council** —the nonprofit entity of the 500 seat **Algonquin Arts Theater** in Manasquan, NJ—has developed an opportunity for BMI **Advanced** and **Second Year** Workshop members. "**Before Broadway**" is a series of staged readings developed to give writers a chance to see how their work plays in front of a "regular audience." The Council will provide the theater and that audience for three readings per year. Each show will receive a \$1,000 stipend toward producing its reading, and transportation by van on the day of

the performance. The selected writers will be required to carry out and/or oversee all hands-on production responsibilities (casting, rehearsals, engaging a director [if any], musical direction, etc.). And representatives from various regional theaters will be invited for a first look at the shows.

Each of the three selected shows will also get a smaller stipend to produce a 20-minute sampler, for an evening presentation this May to kick off the series. The full readings will take place during the 2001-2002 theatre season.

The requirements are a **full script and demo recording** (CD or cassette) delivered by hand or snail-mail, no later than **March 12, 2001**, to **Jean Banks c/o BMI (Musical Theatre Department), 320 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019**. BMI will forward all submissions to the Algonquin Arts Theatre.

## **POLARIS SUMMIT**

**Oklahoma City University** is accepting unpublished and unproduced works for its **Polaris Summit for New Music Theater** on **May 10-12**. **Deadline: March 1, 2001**. Members of the **Oklahoma Opera and Music Theater Company** will perform a representative scene and two songs from each of four selected submissions. Limit: two submissions per author. Send bio, one-page synopsis, a demo tape or CD if available, \$15 reading fee, typed and bound script (name, address, and phone number on title page), and SASE with appropriate postage for return of materials to:

**Polaris Summit**  
c/o Debbie Musick  
**Oklahoma City University**  
2501 N Blackwelder  
Oklahoma City, OK 73106

# **Personals**

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## **SEEKING COMPOSER/COLLABORATOR**

For contemporary musical play in two acts set in Manhattan art gallery. Need bright, bouncy music for twelve songs. Call **Nedda** at **(212) 582-3568** or leave message.

## **LYRICIST/LIBRETTIST WANTED**

Composer of a recently produced musical seeks lyricist/librettist or lyricist for collaboration. If you have a pre-existing book needing musicalizing or new ideas for a project, call **Burt Polayes** at **(718) 858-3958**, or e-mail **unklharv@aol.com**.

## **LOOKING FOR A COMPOSER?**

**Steve Yorra** (Composer/Advanced) seeks lyricist, librettist and projects to work on. Please contact him at **(212) 604-0161** or **Syorrany@aol.com**.

## **COMPOSER / BOOKWRITER LOOKING FOR LYRICIST / BOOKWRITER**

to collaborate on a song cycle or chamber musical. Please contact **Corey** at **coreys24@yahoo.com** or **(718) 230-1768**.

## **BIBLE BELTING or: A NEW TESTAMENT "HAIR," ANYONE?**

**Ron Yatter**, former Senior VP at

the William Morris Agency, is looking for a contemporary composer in the pop/rock/opera vein to set a completed libretto (book and lyrics) for the theatre, based upon a new telling of the **Samson and Delilah** biblical legend. The libretto contains many romantic and dramatic lyric pieces. Ron can be contacted by email: [ronyatter@aol.com](mailto:ronyatter@aol.com) or by phone (212) 247-9800.

## Shelf Life

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### BERNSTEIN LIVE AT THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

a new 10-CD set released on the **New York Philharmonic** label features, among nine essays in its extensive, glossy accompanying booklet. an article called "**I Turned Pages for Leonard Bernstein**" by **Jack Gottlieb** (alumnus), about his years spent as Bernstein's personal assistant and in-house editor. Included as an addendum to this piece, there is also "**The Table**" —a 1997 Gottlieb entry originally written for a **Sotheby's** catalog to accompany the auction of Bernstein's household effects, later expanded for the Fall 1998 issue of "**Prelude, Fugue & Riffs**" published by **Amberson, Inc.**, the company that oversees the Bernstein legacy. As the title might suggest, this is a memory piece about Bernstein's work desk, for years a fixture of his studio at the Dakota on Central Park West.

### SONGS FROM "THE CHRISTMAS SCHOONER"

A CD of songs from the popular Chicago seasonal musical, music and lyrics by **Julie Shannon** (alumna), book by **John Reeger**, is now available and can be purchased by check or credit card (Mastercard or Visa only) for \$16.50 per copy (price includes shipping and handling, Illinois residents add 8.25% sales tax) from **Louisa May Alleycat Music**, 2116 Thornewood Avenue, Wilmette, IL 60091-1452, Phone: (847) 256-0112, Fax: (647) 256-0111, Email: [LMAMusic@aol.com](mailto:LMAMusic@aol.com).

Based on historic events, "The Christmas Schooner" is a fictional account of a 19th Century Great Lakes captain who is intent on sailing the treacherous waters of Lake Michigan in order to bring the Tannenbaum (the Christmas tree) to the thousands of German immigrants in Chicago who otherwise would have no tree. It is also the account of the sailor's wife, who cannot understand her husband's mission until the time comes when she too must choose between personal risk and service to others.

#### Newsletter Staff

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# Members In the News

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## **Angelo Parra's New Play: THE DEVIL'S MUSIC**

*(The following text is from the press release for the forthcoming production:)*

*New York City* —The Melting Pot Theatre Company is presenting the NYC premiere of the award-winning play, "The Devil's Music," written by prize-winning playwright Angelo Parra, a BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop librettist. Performances begin Jan. 24.

Angelo Parra has been a BMI librettist since 1996.

"The Devil's Music" stages the life and music of the legendary and controversial Bessie Smith, the greatest and most influential classic blues singer of the 1920s, who used her voice and style to struggle out of poverty and establish the blues as a traditional American music form.

The play won a 2000 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for the playwright.

Actress-singer Miche Braden returns to the role of Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues." The talented Braden starred as Bessie in a Penguin Repertory Company (Rockland County) production of "The Devil's Music," directed by Joe Brancato, in February. She also played Billie Holiday in Penguin's 1991 production of "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill."

The rousing and spirited show features many of the heartrending and naughty songs that made

Bessie Smith the highest paid black entertainer of her time. Among the songs popularized by Smith are "I Ain't Got Nobody," "St. Louis Blues," "Baby Doll," "Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do," and "Gimme a Pigfoot."

The Melting Pot Theatre production of "The Devil's Music" opens for a limited engagement January 24 and through March 4 at Theatre Three, 311 West 43rd Street, just off Eighth Avenue. Performances are Wednesday through Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets can be purchased through Ticket Central, (212) 279-4200, 1 to 8 p.m., and are available at \$25, \$10 off the regular price, by mentioning code MPTDM. Information on group rates can be obtained by calling (212) 874-7210.

After the Melting Pot engagement, "The Devil's Music" and cast move to Florida Stage in Manalapan, Florida, opening there March 16.

Bessie Smith's turbulent life encompassed a tragic childhood, a flamboyant lifestyle and stormy marriage, and a fickle public that eventually turned its back on the blues. Despite all this, Bessie, an extraordinarily talented but hard-drinking, lusty, and volatile woman, was almost single-handedly responsible for thrusting African-American-Southern blues into mainstream music. She made over 160 recordings and, at the height of her popularity, she sold more records than anyone other

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# Lehman's Terms

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## More of Lehman Engel's thoughts on comedy.

"Don't tell *jokes* in a song. They've all been told before you."

"Don't make footnote-needing references. [Such allusions are] the trouble with a lot of 'Of Thee I Sing' [by the Gershwins], and some Cole Porter. Comedy is the most perishable thing, and the hardest to create."

And as a corollary: "Don't do inside jokes."

"Work back-to-front, payoff first if there is one."

"Hammerstein wasn't a great comedy-writer, probably in reaction to Hart."

"Comedy is easiest when the tense is first person."

"If the lyrics are unfunny, the music, however comic, isn't going to help."

## Reactions to Comedy Songs Presented in Class

After hearing a so-so comedy song by collaborators: "Well, God knows they tried."

Reacting to a song that had a lot of pauses, a comment directed to the composer: "Do you serve tea with these intermissions?"

About a song with an obvious punchline: "Too neon-sign."

About a Lola song (for the comedy assignment drawn from William Inge's "Come Back, Little

Sheba"), which sounded like an art song: "Really terrible...the music is atrocious [because] it changes form...In comedy, the more you do, the more risk [of failure] you're taking." The writer stammered, "I had to go ahead and finish it and bring it in." Lehman riposted, "You could've gone ahead and finished it and burned it."

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## "Members In the News"

*(continued)*

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than Caruso and Al Jolson.

Playwright Angelo Parra has production credits in New York, Los Angeles, the Chicago and Washington, D.C., areas, and at the Edinburgh International Festival. He is a 1989 and 2000 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in Playwriting, director of the Hudson Valley Professional Playwrights Lab, and is adjunct professor of theatre and playwriting at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

"The Devil's Music" was conceived by Penguin Repertory Company Artistic Director Joe Brancato, the music selected and arranged by Miche Braden, and the play researched and written by Angelo Parra. Brancato has directed such luminaries as Madeline Kahn, Matthew Broderick, Sarah Jessica Parker, Marisa Tomei, and John Turturro, and is the director of the current Off-Broadway hit, "Cobb," produced by actor Kevin Spacey.

**"Got Game?"**                      ***(continued)***

frequently to make sure casino electronics weren't interfering with its signal. All was well, but I was willing to stand on the Boardwalk on a blustery November afternoon if it meant not missing that call. (I told you I was a junkie!)

We went to lunch at the Wild West casino's buffet, and were seated on the faux veranda of a well-appointed farmhouse. Outside, it was windy and bright, downstairs, slots were jangling, but here, it was a quiet, starlit night. Somewhere between the salad bar and the hot-vegetable table, my pocket chirped and I nearly dropped a plate of peel-and-eat shrimp. "MISSED CALL" the display read mockingly, and I felt sick. Back on the veranda, I checked for a message. A producer from *Millionaire* said she'd make one more attempt to call; if I couldn't be reached, I'd forfeit my chance to continue in the game. Said my wife: "You're getting a signal here? You're not moving from this spot!" We ate our salads in grave fear of further atmospheric disturbance.

Just as Caran was offering to fetch an entree for me, the phone rang again: my second chance. I answered questions about my age, citizenship, previous game-show appearances (none), and political candidacy (even less), and denied familial relationships with anyone working for about a dozen companies related to the production of *Millionaire*. At last I was deemed eligible to continue. Major sting operations are organized

with less attention to detail. I was given a time and day for my play-off game, a new 800-number through which to reach it, and a 7-digit numerical code I'd need to identify myself as a player. Warned not to lose them because they could not be retrieved, I wrote them down three times—one went in my wallet, one in Caran's, and one more just for security. The caller wished me luck and rang off, leaving me to spend the rest of the day in delighted relief that I hadn't had to answer playoff questions by pressing the tiny buttons on my cell-phone while sitting in a restaurant.

On the day before my playoff game, I checked the phone for messages to find—horrors!—one from *Millionaire!* Panic set in. Had I missed my game? Had they found out about my complete collection of *Password* home games and decided I was ineligible? No, they'd changed the 800-number for playoffs and needed to give me the new one. I wrote the number several times, saved the voice message just in case, and tried to get my breathing regulated.

At last, game day arrived. At the appointed time, I sharpened my pencil, got out a clean legal pad, and closed the office door. I took the notes from my wallet and placed the call. The recorded voice gave me a telephone number to call if there were any technical problems with the game. I wrote it dutifully and was prompted for my entry code. I keyed it in; the computerized voice said, "You have entered an invalid PIN."

Please try again." I checked the number and tried again. "You have entered an invalid PIN two times. Thank you for calling." The line went dead.

I punched in the troubleshooting number as quickly as I could, and panicked a little more when I got voice mail rather than a person. I left a message and hung up.

I tried the game number again and, on a whim—or perhaps on instructions from somewhere deep in my subconscious—reversed two digits of the PIN. The computerized voice welcomed me. The game was on!

As I answered each of five put-these-items-in-order questions, my pulse quickened, like a tension-building vamp modulating up by half-steps. The Voice didn't say, in its recorded semi-sincerity, "I'm sorry, that was an *incorrect* answer," but I didn't know if that meant I'd been right on all five, or if, to build the suspense further, they simply didn't do that in playoff games. I keyed in the telephone number where I could be reached for the next four hours—thank heaven for cell phones!—and tried to go back to work.

That lasted about nine seconds. The uncertainty of it all was too great. I got on the Internet and researched my answers. I *had* been right! I set the cell-phone's ringer to "Wake the Dead" mode and stayed away from the center of the building.

At 4:50, the phone rang. *Okay*, I thought as I landed, *maybe that volume setting had been excessive*. I met "Melissa from *Millionaire*,"

who informed me that our call would be recorded for quality-assurance purposes, then began the same litany of are-you-now-or-have-you-ever-been questions I'd answered from Atlantic City. It seemed that Melissa was putting even more emphasis than her predecessor on the "if you are selected" clause of each question. *Was there a tie? I wondered. Is there another playoff? Or maybe an actual flaming hoop to jump through?* At last, she clinched it: "You're coming to New York to play *Millionaire!*"

There's the rub. On games like *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy!*, contestants are responsible for their own travel arrangements: it's up to you to get there, but if you lose, you'll take home a year's supply of Kentucky Fried Chicken, a case of Turtle Wax, or something like that—items commonly referred to as "lovely parting gifts." *Millionaire* is different. Each contestant and a guest is given a hotel room near the studio, a small per diem to cover expenses, and round-trip transportation to New York. Most players get to fly. I was offered car service. I left that for my wife, who'd be coming from Brooklyn. My office is just down the street from the studio, and only a few blocks from the hotel, so I chose to walk. (I've walked to the hospital for elective surgery, and this was likely to be more fun.)

My wife wasn't home to share the good news, so I celebrated the best way I knew how: I bought an almanac. There's no way to fully prepare for a trivia game like *Mil-*

*lionaire* (where, on an infamous episode, two adjacent high-level questions concerned the given names of 20th-century popes and heavy-metal Grammy-award winners), but a book with lots of lists might be useful. I started brushing up on state capitals, Zodiac signs, American currency portraiture, and such—the sort of thing every sixth-grader probably knows and I'd kick myself if I missed.

For the rest of the week, it seemed as if nobody could pass my desk without tossing off some bizarre bit of trivia or testing me with a question. Everyone had an opinion as to the configuration of my phone-friend team (I could bring a list of five possibilities). My wife and I spent more time than I would have imagined coming up with the perfect shirt-and-tie combination. Friends and co-workers wanted to know what I planned to do with my winnings. (I tried, not-counting-chickens-wise, to deflect all such inquiries.) The guy who cuts my hair finished his work, stepped back, and pronounced me “ready for TV.” Melissa called for a “pre-interview,” from which she'd prepare the notes Regis would find on a biographical “blue card” if I made it to the Hot Seat and we had a chance to chat. All in all, the rest of the week was as exciting, and as nerve-wracking fun, as I've since the days leading up to my wedding.

I left the office to applause and blushed down Broadway. After settling into my room—at, synchronistically, the hotel where I'd first stayed in New York—I read my welcome packet and release

forms agreeing to the rules of the game. My fellow contestants and I met for the first time at a briefing that evening. When I'd heard the weather report that morning—severe snowstorms in the midwest—my first thought was, “Hey! Snow in the competition!” My second was, “Oh, how mean!” I felt worse when I realized the contestant coordinator announced that there were only nine of us; due to travel complications, the tenth player had forfeited just a few hours before. But the game waits for no one. Our briefing continued, discussing the following day's schedule and approving our wardrobe choices; then we were free for the remainder of the evening. I had dinner with a friend, tipping heavily on ABC's tab, then went back to the hotel. (Caran had been ill and was going to join me for the taping, but preferred to spend the night at home.) I called to check in with the folks on my phone list, including a friend who works for *Family Feud*. Championship football teams have had less inspiring pep-talks than he gave me.

Game day. I live in Brooklyn, so it was odd and delightful to wake up without having to face a commute. Players and guests assembled for roll-call in the hotel lobby and were shuttle-bused a few blocks to the studio. We passed through security, being shaken down for cell phones, laptops, pagers, PDAs, cameras, books, note pads, maps, and anything that could present the appearance of impropriety. (After much discussion, one contestant's mother was

permitted to keep her cross-stitch materials.) At breakfast, we met our producers—Melissa was shorter than she sounded on the phone—for another interview. Since we first spoke, I'd thought of an anecdote that delighted Melissa, who planned to work it onto my blue card. Two floor producers introduced themselves; they'd be supervising us in the studio. After assigning us our seat numbers, they led us to the set for rehearsal.

Each of us had a turn in the Hot Seat, answering a couple of questions under the same conditions we'd face during taping: the same overdramatic music, lights, and noisily moving cameras. (The first step there was learning how to get into the Seat, which is tall and wobbly.) We could try Lifelines—our guests in the bleachers formed an audience we could poll; a technician at his switcher proved a trusty friend to “phone.” I was amazed that none of us was given misleading information, so we'd have a chance to see what happens when someone misses a question. (I was not, however, going to take the fall, just to see for myself.)

After a briefing by the show's legal department about how the game mechanism works, we practiced Fastest Finger questions (that's the show's name for the on-air qualifying round). The setup is ridiculously unergonomical: there's plenty of glare on the monitors where we see the possibilities; the answer buttons, convex and widely spaced, are tricky to push accurately, and the tiny display on

which we see the order we've keyed in is, so far as I could tell, the only thing in the studio that isn't backlit. Still, the conditions were identical for each of us, so we could commiserate but not claim unfairness.

A mostly-quiet lunch followed, then we were separated from our guests—they headed for the studio, while we players were sent for final pre-game preparation. We dressed, were fitted for body-pack microphones, were primped for hair and slathered with makeup, then, after one last trip to the rest room, marched off to the studio.

The day gets surreal from here. It's basically a three-act play. Most game shows are recorded live-to-tape, stopping only for two-minute breaks where the commercials will fit, or in case of a severe technical problem. *Millionaire* is recorded more like a film, with plenty of short takes edited together to make the show you see on TV. After each Fastest Finger question is asked but before the answers are revealed, one of the floor producers makes his speak-now-or-forever-hold-your-peace rounds, checking each of us for possible difficulties. Also, Hot Seat contestants are permitted to deliberate for as long as they like before committing to a final answer; while they seem to take forever before answering when you see a player on TV, that time has most likely been severely edited. (One contestant is said to have sat there mulling over his answer for 55 minutes.)

The returning champion played out his game, missing on a ques-

tion I didn't know either. Thus began Act I: The Question About TV Shows I Don't Watch. I punched in my answer as carefully as possible, but I was wrong. Oh, well. A new Hot Seat player took her place—someone who hadn't done especially well in rehearsal. Her mom put away the cross-stitch and this new game began. She did respectably well, though she didn't break the bank. Stop tape, reset for another Fastest Finger question; Act II: The Question About Movies I Haven't Seen. Oh, well. During the next break, the woman seated beside me bemoaned having punched in her answers in reverse order. She felt worse than I did, knowing she'd known the answer. The next winner, who admitted that his nickname was "Mr. Trivia," took his place in the Hot Seat and started his climb toward instant riches. When he got stuck on a question whose answer I knew, I realized again that this game can bring out the worst in its players: I sat there rooting for a nice guy to give a wrong answer. And he did. And, suddenly, seven of us were back in the game. It was time for an unusual third Fastest Finger question—Act III: The Easy Geography question. As soon as it appeared on my screen, I knew that I knew this one...and that just about everybody else would, too. There was no time to waste, no dawdling on this one. I keyed in my answer and hit the enter key, confident and excited. Regis read the correct answers; I watched as they appeared on his monitor. The words were right but the letters

weren't familiar. I squinted at the tiny display above my keypad and realized I'd pressed the *buttons* in geographical order...but the answers hadn't been.

There's a moment in every game show, executive producer Michael Davies says, when the contestant wins or loses everything. I hadn't thought about the fact that each of us experiences that moment. I imagined my first-grade teacher watching the show and musing, "He used to be such a bright boy...what ever happened to him?"

We were ushered off the set into a dim backstage area where our microphones were removed. Thankfully, the winners seemed as shell-shocked as the rest of us: no gleeful leaping and whooping. Back in the dressing room, the winners had some additional papers to sign; then we picked up our things, and crammed into the van. During the higher levels of the game, Regis and the contestants display checks bearing his "signature". Of course, the signatures are stamped on, the checks are props, and checks are made for all the contestants in preparation for anybody's trip to the Hot Seat. Before closing the van's door and sending us on our way, floor producer JP gave each of us a final souvenir of the experience: our personalized million-dollar prop check.

Caran and I took our chauffeured ride; we'd been in a chilly TV studio most of the day, and it was time to get home. It was a little tricky facing the office folks the next morning who wanted to know the results; but, eventually, I began

to believe it when I said, “Hey, it’s only a game.” And it is—not only that, but, alone among game shows in that *Millionaire* allows contestants to try again. Provided that they make it through three questions on the 800 number...and get chosen in a random drawing...and still don’t have any relatives who work for the wrong companies...and write down their PIN correctly...and answer five *more* questions...and get chosen in *another* random drawing...and, hey—it’s not just an hour-long show. It’s an adventure. And it doesn’t take winning a million dollars to change your life.



*by Richard Engquist*

A December rain is falling on Brooklyn and the sky—what I can see of it through curtains very much in need of a holiday laundering—has the look of unpolished pewter. But inside all is warm and fuzzy. An old dog and his old human are drying out, the breakfast coffee is digesting (if that's what coffee does), and from the record player comes an uninterrupted flow of wonderful old tunes. Irving Berlin, rendered with taste and humor by the ever-reliable Joan Morris, with William Bolcom at the piano.

When that CD has run its course I'll put on the 1965 version of "Carousel," with John Raitt and a superb company. What melodies! What passion! What a tonic for a dreary day, a dreary month, the end of the dreariest political campaign in memory! Thank goodness for music, which not only has charms to soothe the savage breast but also to restore the flattened soul and stir embers of hope in the most cynical of sensibilities.

Come to think of it, the presidential race 2000 was a lot like some of the scores one has had to endure in recent years: a little motive repeated ad nauseam; a fragmentary idea wandering here

and there, never developing into anything engaging or persuasive; the drone of sung dialogue that somehow doesn't lead to the heightened emotions of an actual song. The show ends, eventually, as everything must. The curtain comes down, the house lights go up, the Supreme Court makes a decision, everyone sighs and goes home. You know it's over because you're exhausted, but you can't remember the climax. Did you doze off in the middle of all that convoluted, attenuated, unfocused effort? There were notes, there were harmonies, rhythms—but where was the music?

Never mind. It's Sunday afternoon. Toss something delicious onto the record player and let your spirits soar. Choose an artist who knows how to give full weight to both words and music—Ella Fitzgerald, Fred Astaire, Joe Williams, either Ethel (Merman or Waters), Sammy Davis, Bobby Short, Bernadette Peters, the peerless Barbara Cook. Sure, the material will be old, but it will be good. Melodic and memorable.

Think of all the old shows that have been presented anew in recent years, not because they're old but because the scores are terrific: "The Music Man," "Kiss

Me, Kate," "Carousel," "Annie Get Your Gun," "Guys and Dolls," "The Most Happy Fella," "Damn Yankees," "Cabaret," "Chicago," "...Forum," "Gypsy," "The Sound of Music," "The King and I." For the future we're promised "Oklahoma," "South Pacific," "Bells Are Ringing" and who knows what else.

Why not? Why shouldn't each generation have a chance to experience these classics "live"? It's not like revisiting a beloved old movie—rent a tape and pop it into the VCR. Theatre demands that you *be there* for maximum impact. A good Broadway score is always welcome, even if you have to put up with a hopelessly outdated book, as in some of the choices of the blessed "Encores!" series and similar ventures.

The need for song has become more and more obvious along with the lack of song in a number of productions in recent years. *The New York Post* reporter Michael Riedel, in a February 1999 screed, wrote: "Tuneless shows...are becoming the norm...There are composers [who] actively resist melody. Rather than a collection of theatre songs, their scores are a collage of angst-ridden art music, some of it pretty, but much of it utterly unmemorable—or...downright dreary."

Riedel went on to quote the veteran Broadway bookwriter Joe Masteroff: "I think they are frightened that if they write a good song they will be called old-fashioned...They have talent, but you wish somebody would slap them

over the knuckles and make them write a melody."

Well, that article is almost two years old, and today there are signs that someone was paying attention. The new hot ticket "The Full Monty" is full of songs. First-time Broadway composer David Yazbek has said, in effect, that Frank Loesser was his muse for this score. Not a bad muse for music.

The Manhattan Theatre Club's hit, "A Class Act"—to move soon to Broadway—is also a collection of actual theatre songs, by the late Edward Kleban, who learned and honed his craft right here in our very own workshop. Skip Kennon's score for "Time and Again" (in rehearsal as this is written) is richly melodic. Tunes are making a comeback.

Not that they ever went away. Go to any pricey cabaret in town and hear Rosemary Clooney, Michael Fienstein et al singing the great standards, as they always did and always will. Not long ago I went to a classy benefit at Carnegie Hall and what was being sung by artists ranging in age from the twenties to the seventies? Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Jerome Kern and Stephen Sondheim (from his melodic period). Bliss!

A satisfying tune is forever. *I Hear Music...Strange Music... Love's Old Sweet Song... Play a Simple Melody...It Seems to Me I've Heard That Song Before...The Song Is You...With a Song in My Heart...All of a Sudden My Heart Sings...I Let a Song Go Out of My*

*Heart...The Song is Ended But the Melody Lingers On...* somebody stop me!

So it's been a disagreeable autumn. It's over. The USA will survive four years of an unpresident. Some of the money you lost in Nasdaq will come back. And all those charmless, tuneless, over-stuffed shows will fade from memory while a new age of theatre melody dawns. Count on it.

Hey, it's time for Jonathan Schwartz on WNYC. I wonder what he's got up his sleeve today—some gem from Dietz and Schwartz, Hoagy Carmichael, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Van Heusen, or Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields? And if today's program doesn't scintillate, I can always sing some Christmas carols. Heaven knows *they're* durable, and even yours truly Ebenezer Grinch has been known to thaw if you push the right buttons.

So happy holidays, children, and happy 21st Century. May it be a cornucopia of song.