

BY LES SPINDLE

With jukebox musicals and revivals dominating Broadway in recent years, the future of the American book musical more than ever relies on works developed in regional and nonprofit theatres. The Academy for New Musical Theatre is doing its part to keep the art form alive by nurturing the efforts of composers, lyricists, and librettists. Founded in 1979, the Los Angeles-based organization is a descendant of New York's BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop. Last weekend, ANMT and the multimedia production company State of the Art Productions collaborated to present a three-day conference July 14-16 titled "The Biz of the Musical Theatre Biz" at ANMT's North Hollywood headquarters. It featured panel discussions geared to the basics of getting musicals produced and critiques of works in progress. Dozens of registrants took advantage of the event, sharing a wealth of useful information about bringing musical projects to fruition.

A panel moderated by ANMT Associate Artistic Director Elise Dewsberry discussed the pluses and minuses of producing one's own work. Writer-composers Matt Goldsby (*If Only*), Phil Olson (*Don't Hug Me*), and Elin Hampton (*Mommy*) were joined by Chromolume Theatre Company producer James Esposito and Ron Fink, writer of educational and children's shows. Olson recounted the development path of his comedic tuner, a *Music Man*-type story set in a Minnesota karaoke bar. It premiered three years ago at Sherman Oaks' Whitefire Theatre, then grew into a franchise, with successful renditions in several cities and an upcoming Christmas-themed sequel. Goldsby elaborated on the challenges he faces: He is a full-time attorney who was also tackling the business and creative tasks of premiering his ambitious show, based on the works of Honoré de Balzac, presented last year at West Hollywood's Globe Playhouse. Besides offering valuable advice on such concerns as budgeting, insurance requirements, and handling the daunting demands of

the Actors' Equity Association 99-Seat Plan, the panelists made it clear that getting the shows up usually amounts to delayed gratification. Said Goldsby, "Don't be afraid of losing money or getting bad reviews. It's important to get the show on its feet." Hampton noted, "Don't produce your own show if you don't want to take on the many business tasks that are required."

ANMT member Susie Chodakiewicz chaired another panel of producers and artistic directors: Esposito, John Apicella of Antaeus Company, Pierson Blaetz of Greenway Arts Alliance, Ronn Goswick of the debuting Valley Musical Theatre, Michael Michetti of Theatre@Boston Court, and Raul Clayton Staggs of Playwrights' Arena. Among the information gleaned from the two-hour discussion were strategies for keeping play development alive following the demise of the Audrey Skirball Kenis Foundation and the Center Theatre Group's programs, applying for grants, and how committed artists serve as the glue that holds fiscally challenged membership companies together. Additional panels provided tips on contracts, royalties, and other legal matters; what producers are looking for in musicals; and how to approach producers. Among participants were publicist Tim Choy of Davidson & Choy Publicity, Tom McCoy of McCoy Rigby Entertainment, Sheldon Epps of Pasadena Playhouse, producer Susan Dietz, and songwriter Mark Winkler (*Play It Cool*).

In "The ANMT Workshop Process," brief segments of three works-in-progress were read and sung, then incisively critiqued by three ANMT staff members: Dewsberry, Executive Director Scott Guy, and director of music curriculum Ross Källing. The impromptu feedback was wide-ranging, pointing out technical flaws in the music, the clash between the style of a song and the story points it attempts to convey, songs rehashing plot already established in the dialogue, and ambiguities in characterization. Dewsberry emphasized a basic but frequently forgotten tenet in playwriting: "Show, don't tell." Organizers hope to produce a conference again next summer. www.anmt.org. <



Tom McCoy and Mark Winkler
at the Academy for New
Musical Theatre Conference

Say It With Music

ANMT conference explores the craft and challenges of producing musicals.