

The Story of *SWING!*

By Marc Routh

It was the summer of 1997, and as we sat down to dinner after a preview of our presentation of *Forever Tango* on Broadway, my friend Paul Kelly said, "What you should really do is an entertainment based on the music of swing." "And why is that, I asked?" "It's the one music that appeals to everyone. It's joyful, it moves people and it's fun. There is something about it that crosses over generational boundaries. If you have any doubt, just go to a wedding party or bar mitzvah, and watch what happens when the band plays 'In The Mood.' All of a sudden everyone, from eight to eighty, is on the dance floor."

Of the six or seven ideas that Paul pitched over our dinner, it was the swing idea that kept me thinking for weeks afterward. We decided to investigate the burgeoning swing scene. I remember the first night we ventured to the Supper Club to see the dancers and hear the bands. We didn't know the dress code and were actually turned away at the door. When we returned with jackets and ties, we entered what seemed to be another world. It was after midnight, and the dance floor was packed with twenty-somethings, swingin' the night away with a hot band wailing to the beat. I had no idea that this "scene" existed, and that between midnight and 4:00 a.m. while I'd been sleeping swing was back and happening.

We started spending weekends listening to swing music and working up scenarios. We decided that we wanted a female singer that was "an Ann Hampton Callaway type," and when we later ended up with the original, we were thrilled. That fall, with our colleague Jo Porter, we attended the National Swing Dance Championships in California. There we attended an entire weekend of swing dance competitions, learning that a whole host of dance forms and styles live under the umbrella of swing. The traditional Lindy Hop, although the grand-daddy of them all, has metamorphosed into country western swing, west coast swing (which borrows from disco), jive, and rock 'n roll swing, which is more acrobatics than dance.

At the competition, we were introduced to the Lindy Hop champion winners, Ryan Francois and Jenny Thomas. The couple connect in a direct line to Ryan's mentor Frankie Manning, one of the original Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, who contributed to the creation of the Lindy Hop in the 1930's at the Savoy Ballroom. Frankie met with us and encouraged our efforts to harness the spirit and joy of the dance form in a Broadway production.

Back in New York, with Ryan's help, we brought together some of the best Lindy Hoppers from around the world for a half hour presentation with the Blues Jumpers, our favorite local band, joined for the evening by musical director Jon Smith. At 1:00 a.m. on a Saturday night, we cleared the dance floor, and dancers from England, France, Sweden, New York and California presented both couple and ensemble dances which we hoped would show us that it would be possible to sustain an evening's entertainment focusing solely on swing dancing.

What we found was promising but not conclusive. When we brought the idea to our friends and colleagues at Pace and Jumjamcyn, they were enthusiastic and agreed to fund a workshop with us. As Lynne Taylor-Corbett and I flew to Seoul together to work on a new performance piece called *Cookin'*, I explained the concept to her, and she flipped for it. As a director and choreographer, this was exactly the kind of project she had been searching for, and we put together a workshop that would begin rehearsals just a few weeks after her return.

One of our dilemmas was whether to use a company of trained swing dancers or a company of Broadway dancers taught the technique. Ultimately we found that we needed both, and anyone whose talents spanned those two worlds was a godsend. On the singer front, Everett Bradley seemed to straddle the worlds of pop and swing in such a unique way that we knew we had to have him in the cast. And twenty year old Laura Benanti, who had starred opposite Richard Chamberlain in our production of *The Sound of Music*, was another jewel that we knew we wanted on our crown.

We did have two wonderful members of the company, Frankie Manning and fellow Whitey's Lindy Hopper Norma Miller, who helped ground the project in authenticity at an early stage. Although their busy teaching and travel schedules (they weren't able to perform at the same time even in the workshop) didn't allow us to include them in the ultimate show, it was great to see the Masters perform. It was apparent that swing had kept these octogenarians young.

The workshop was a tremendous challenge, starting as we did with a completely blank state and a somewhat overwhelming treasure trove of music. A few days before the presentations scheduled for investors and colleagues, we thought we might have a disaster on our hands. Somehow in the final 48 hours, as we discarded the bits that weren't fully developed and honed the promising ones, the piece, now a little less than an hour long, amazingly came together. By the final presentation the audience was standing up and cheering. Jerry Zaks, who had collaborated with us on *Smokey Joe's Café*, attended the workshop and was impressed with the potential of the evening. He agreed to join as the production supervisor, to help shape and add his own special brand of stage magic to the evening.

Scott Zeiger from SFX Theatricals saw the workshop and invited us to present the show at their upcoming annual conference. Their partners' enthusiastic response helped to confirm our instinct that *SWING!* would have a long life as a touring production.

One of the great benefits of our partnership with Jujamcyn was that their creative director Jack Viertel joined the team and lent his experience to our creative team. In meetings with Jerry, Jack, Lynne, Jon and Paul, the show continued to take shape. In June of 1999 we had a second developmental period to work on the parts of the show which we had not completed in the fall workshop. Because the cast we assembled included many dancers in currently Broadway shows, we never had the full company at one time, and the work was done in bits and pieces. A few weeks after that workshop ended, we did a special

rehearsal/developmental period to work on the "bungee" number, the first version of which was a specially composed vocalese song. Ultimately it was replaced with a more up-tempo song called "Bill's Bounce."

Our plan was to go into rehearsal at the end of August to open on Broadway in October. But round about the fourth of July, we realized that we needed to take what we had learned from the two workshops and see how it all fit together. After this third workshop, we took three weeks off to re-group and re-think what still needed development. Rehearsals for the Broadway production finally began on September 27. By then, the music department had been augmented by ace musical supervisor Michael Rafter and legendary orchestrator Harold Wheeler.

The rehearsal and preview period were grueling. Injuries were a daily part of the routine, as we realized the physical challenge of performing and rehearsing this incredibly strenuous combination of dance, aerobics, and acrobatics eight hours a day for over ten weeks.

As we approached the first preview, we targeted certain numbers for full revision or replacement. "Harlem Nocturne," the number performed by Caitlin Carter and bass player Conrad Korsch, was not working. We decided to cut it, but Caitlin persuaded us to try it in front of audiences, and we continued to experiment with the number, trying multiple costumes and slight alterations in the dance. Paul suggested trying a musical motif on Caitlin's costume, and designer William Ivey Long added the "F stops" of the bass instrument to Caitlin's bodysuit, Jerry Zaks directed Caitlin to play directly to the bass player, and Lynne altered the choreography just a touch. The dance magically came together as did Caitlin's identity as the genie within the bass.

The costumes of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" also transformed that number. In the workshop presentations, "Boogie Woogie" was an audience favorite, stopping the show with its wonderful amalgamation of swing and hip-hop with the guys decked out in streetwise costumes. On Broadway it didn't land until it was

decided to keep Everett Bradley's character consistent and to put the other two guys in matching business suits and ties, complete with briefcases. Suddenly the juxtaposition of styles and sensibilities made sense and the number re-emerged.

The closing number of Act I was originally a medley of World War II standards, but it didn't quite have the impact we wanted for an act closer. We also hadn't quite found a spot for the Glenn Miller classic "In the Mood," the song which Paul cited when he talked about the inspiration for the piece. When musical supervisor Michael Rafter, guest dance arranger Jeanine Tesori, and vocal arranger Yaron Gershovsky added a vocalese version of "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" in five-part harmony to new and improved choreography by Lynne Taylor-Corbett, we finally had our thrilling Act I ending.

For the most part, Act II seemed to work like a charm from the beginning. "Dancers In Love" took a little massaging to get the right degree of May-December romance. "Bill's Bounce," the bungee number, which always suffered from lack of sustained rehearsal time, finally literally took off. Adding a few extra beats at critical moments allowed the dancers to re-connect to the music and the unison sections to coalesce. New costumes incorporating the conceit of the bungee cords helped to bring the number to life.

The dual numbers of "Kitchen Mechanic's Night Out" and "Shout and Feel It" were designed to show off the unique talents of Lindy Champions Ryan Francois and Jenny Thomas. "Kitchen Mechanic's Night Out" was especially commissioned to introduce the specialty dance in "Shout and Feel It," yet neither had the impact we had expected. When first Ryan and later Jenny were injured during previews, we temporarily cut the numbers. The second act then flowed perfectly, and when we realized that the songs inherently belonged in the pre-USO section of the first act, the show finally sailed into its natural order

On opening night, when we paused to look at the work created over the last year and a half, we couldn't help but applaud the

artistry of this unique collection of dancers, singers, and musicians. The end result of this fantastic collective effort is a pure, unadulterated dose of that same infectious joy we set out to bottle and serve up.