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The relentless quest for fresh ways to convey conflict and catharsis is taking American theatre in a surprising new direction

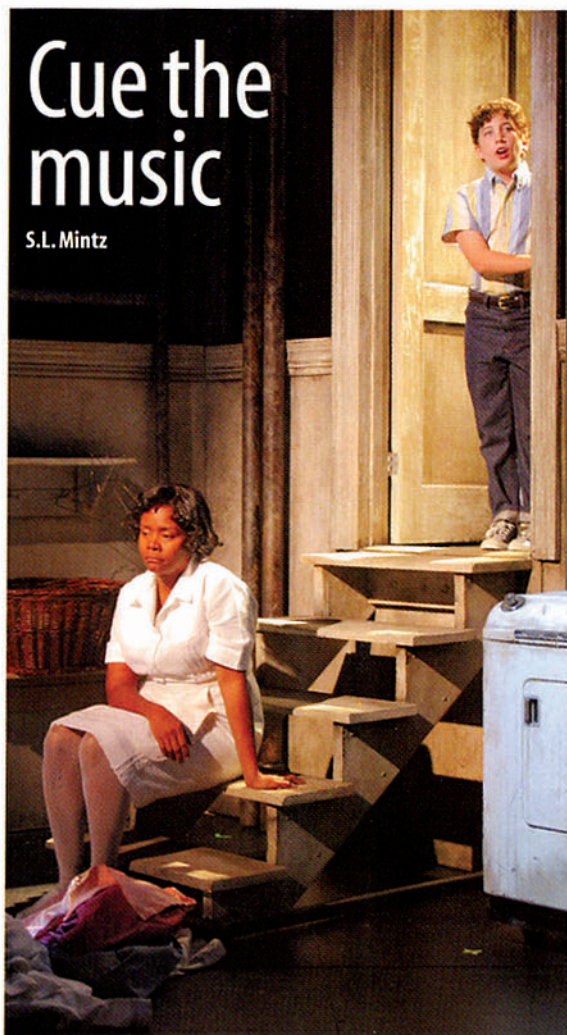
Tennessee Williams meets Rodgers and Hart (and even Mozart). Flouting historical disdain, serious drama on the American stage has embraced the musical with gusto. Exhibit one: "Caroline, or Change", which arrived on Broadway in May after a celebrated run at New York's Public theatre.

Tony Kushner, a playwright and author of the much-lauded "Angels in America", joined forces with Jeanine Tesori, a composer, to stage an unsentimental tale centred on friction between a Jewish family and a black maid coping with economic slavery in her starched, white uniform. Set in Louisiana in 1963, on the cusp of social upheaval, its unsettling tension departs abruptly from typical feelgood musical fare—with singing washing machines and city buses making a strange and disarming chorus.

"At a time when musicals seem to be groping for ways to move beyond campy Broadway fluff without boring the audience to tears, 'Caroline' is a breakthrough," raved Richard Zoglin in *Time* magazine. John Lahr, a theatre critic, also felt the ground shift. "There are moments in the history of theatre when stagecraft takes a new turn," he wrote in the *New Yorker*. "I like to think that this happened for the American musical last week, when Tony Kushner's 'Caroline, or Change'...bushwhacked a path beyond the narrative dead end of the deconstructed, overfreighted musicals of the past 30 years."

Dark side of the musical

Amid record interest reported in professional musical theatre workshops and university graduate programmes, the debut of "Caroline" on Broadway could signal a window for plays with similar ambition. More are waiting in the wings. In "Marie Christine", Michael John LaChiusa, a composer-lyricist, has transformed Medea into a black woman from New Orleans beset by misogyny and



Cue the music

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racism. She falls for an ambitious white politician from Chicago who tosses her aside; by murdering their two children she also kills prospects for a heart-warming finale.

Psychology, history and music chart a dramatic course in "The Light in the Piazza", a collaboration between Adam Guettel, a composer, and Craig Lucas, a playwright, based on a novel by Elizabeth Spencer. "I'd rather be thought of as a dramatist than as a songwriter," says Mr Guettel, who describes "Light" as an effort to resurrect joy from the looming clutch of heartbreak. A young woman of great privilege, confined to the mental capacity of a child, wonders if her limitations will forever rule out romantic love. Music endows the story with its richness. "More complex harmonies give you

access to the darker kind of musical theatre and also to its more joyful side," says Mr Guettel.

After recent productions in Seattle and Chicago, "Light" is reportedly headed for New York City, where a production of "Floyd Collins" vaulted Mr Guettel to prominence in theatrical circles. Its eponymous hero, a real-life Kentucky cave explorer, triggered a two-week media carnival in 1925 when he became trapped in a mine-shaft. (Billy Wilder's 1951 movie version, "Ace in the Hole", starred Kirk Douglas.) Writing music about a solitary man who died before rescuers reached him forced Mr Guettel away from conventions. "Something was distinctly different," says Sid Ramin, who supplied orchestrations for many Broadway musicals, including "West Side Story". "I couldn't sense bar lines or true signatures," he says in praise of the result. "The music just flowed." As for its unconventional lyrics, John Guare, a playwright, says "Floyd Collins" sings about the hope that is never a solution.

These plays advance a musical tradition with roots extending from vaudeville to grand opera. "In 'Caroline' we didn't set out to bust the musical form," says Ms Tesori, who also composed music for "Thoroughly Modern Millie", a production more in tune with current Broadway standards. "Millie" looks like its poster, says Ms Tesori. "There was not a lot of room for complication or surprise." In contrast, "Caroline" demands both from a composer. Besides refrains keyed to Mr Kushner's terse vision, nearly all dialogue is sung, not spoken, in operatic fashion.

Ms Tesori acknowledges musical debts to Mozart, Kurt Weill, the Gershwins and especially Stephen Sondheim, whose 1991 collaboration with playwright John Weidman, "Assassins", explored the motives of people who sought to kill American presidents. But by marrying dramatic aspirations and musical conventions as each form was groping for a new voice, this growing band of playwright-musicians has spawned its own tradition, a robust and lyrical—if not always happy—medium. ■

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