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Concert Reading of Musical Comedy Brings Stars to McCarter Theatre

By Anne Levin

When the musical comedy *The Big Time* is staged at McCarter Theatre on Friday, January 31, there will be no sets, costumes, or choreography. But the lineup of performers seated on stools at this concert reading of the play, accompanied by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO), represents some of Broadway's busiest and best-loved actors.



Santino Fontana

The second installment of the orchestra's PRINCETON POPS series, *The Big Time* is a collaboration of the PSO and McCarter Theatre Center. The show, written by Douglas Carter Beane, takes place during the Cold War. Russian spies take over an ocean liner holding all of NATO, and some lounge singers on board save the day by turning the communists on to singing, dancing, and comedy.

The cast includes Tony Award-winners Santino Fontana and Debbie Gravitte, along with Laura Osnes, Jackie Hoffman, Michael McCormick, Bradley Dean, and Raymond Bokhour — names familiar to those who frequent Broadway musicals.

"If I had one of these people, I would be grateful," said Douglas J. Cohen, composer and lyricist for the show. "To have all of these amazing people, so varied and with so many things in their arsenals, is incredible. They are Broadway luminaries, and they are phenomenal. These are people who can make you laugh and break your heart."

The other Doug associated with *The Big Time* is Douglas Carter Beane, the author and director whose credits include *The Nance*, *As Bees in Honey Drown*, *Shows for Days*, *Cinderella*, *Xanadu*, and *Sister Act*. He first did the show two decades ago. "This is actually the very first musical theater piece I ever wrote, many years ago," said Beane. "It was different then. It was about terrorism. Just magically, every time we would go to do a production, there would be another terrorist attack, which would sell tickets."

The show was originally set in Atlantic City, and the two lounge singers were from South Philadelphia. "This was the late nineties,

when Atlantic City was full of these kinds of shows,” Beane said. “But it’s different now.”

Beane took a break from the play to work on several other musicals. When he decided he wanted to direct as well as write, he remembered how much he had enjoyed working on the show. He asked two friends, director Jerry Zaks and actress Tracey Ullman, what they thought. They urged him to change the time period and the setting. “So I started watching the news,” Beane said. “I saw Russia was in the news a lot. I approached Doug Cohen, and said, ‘What if we set it in the early 1960s and made them communists and NATO?’ it took a week and a half to do the rewrite.”

The Big Time, revised, was staged by actors at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Beane’s alma mater, and it did well. Michael Rosenberg, McCarter’s managing director, was familiar with the show and suggested it as a collaboration with the PSO.

Cohen, whose resume includes multiple awards and such off-Broadway productions as *The Evolution of Mann*, *No Way to Treat a Lady*, *The Gig*, and *Children’s Letters to God*, is happy to be a part of the show once more. “I always had a fondness for it. It has such an optimistic spirit,” he said. “And it has a sound that is really fun to listen to — from the era of Big Bands, swing, and the Rat Pack. August Eriksmoen, who has been lauded on Broadway, has done an exceptional orchestration of the score. And the Princeton Pops is just amazing.”

The story of art triumphing over evil is especially meaningful to Cohen. “I do believe in that,” he said. “This is not a play that is blatantly political, but you can read things into it. It has relevance today, even though it’s set in 1963. There will always be artists and people who believe in creativity and putting something positive into the world.”

The Big Time is Friday, January 31 at 8 p.m. at McCarter’s Matthews Theatre, 91 University Place. Tickets start at \$25. Visit mccarter.org or princetonsymphony.org, or call (609) 258-2787.