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Playwrights Bring Workshop to City College

Theatre Arts Department Performs New Musical, Helping Its Authors Polish Their Production

Interim Theatre is preparing a staged reading of Jeff Rizzo and Cheri Steinkellner’s brand new musical *Hello! My Baby* April 30 and May 1.

“We will do a kind of workshop, largely with students, so that Steinkellner can hear the music in context,” said Tom Garey, chair of the department.

The story could be described as an attempt to make an old-fashioned music score into a fresh musical comedy about song-pluggers, gangsters, immigrants, socialites and sweatshop workers involved in love triangles, gender-swapping and ukulele playing on the Lower East Side of Manhattan 1916.

A song-plugger was a piano player employed by a store to perform music to customers before they bought the notes. *Hello! My Baby* is about people who sold sheet music, said Rick Mokler, director of the workshop.

“They were all men, so the lead girl (a teenaged factory worker called Nelly Gold) dresses up as a man and that creates a whole series of comic potentials,” Mokler said.

The workshop at City College, which will be performed for free, features 25 songs from the era of Tin Pan Alley, a group of New York City-based music publishers and songwriters who dominated popular music in the United States about 100 years ago.

This will be the second reading of *Hello! My Baby*. An earlier version was performed with high school students and professional actors at Rubicon Theatre in Ventura, Mokler said. There are also plans to workshop the piece intensively this summer in at least one major developmental venue, according to a backgrounder by Rizzo and Steinkellner

Rizzo, who has composed all additional music and made arrangements, and Steinkellner, who has written new lyrics, are both prominent, successful writers, Mokler said.

Steinkellner contributed songs to *The World Goes ‘Round*, the last show performed at the Garvin Theatre before the ongoing renovation. During that musical collaboration, Steinkellner told Mokler she was working on a new script that turned out to be *Hello! My Baby*, Mokler said. Steinkellner, who lives in Santa Barbara, has been a friend of the theater for years, he said.

In the backgrounder, Rizzo and Steinkellner say they want “to create a new-fashioned musical that will go the distance commercially on its way to the ultimate goal – joining the canon of musicals that schools and communities can produce with the sure-fire success of *Grease*, *Little Shop*, and *High School Musical*, while adding a big, bright, authentic dose of cultural literacy, theater legacy, history, and fun to the mix.”

The Theatre Arts Department is in the middle of auditioning the characters. Because most roles are for teenagers, the Interim Theatre will use City College students for all young characters, while they will look for older actors in the community, Mokler said.

Mokler is both directing and producing the musical. His task is to coordinate how the writers want the performers to sing and read the lines, he said.

“He does everything in this production,” said Pam Lasker, theater operations assistant at City College.

“There’s not much movement in a staged reading,” Mokler said. “From a director’s point of view it’s much easier. You try to accomplish what the writers want to do. They want to hear the words read in accordance with what their intentions are.”

The purpose is to fix problems, but also to expose it to a new audience and give it a fresh approach, Mokler said. He doesn’t want to talk much about the future but admits that the hope certainly is that the musical would go all the way to Broadway.

Garey at first seemed to share this view. “To say that I think it ‘would go all the way to Broadway’ is a good bit of an overstatement,” he later wrote in an e-mail message.

“Certainly it might, but that would be a long way off. Should it happen we would be very pleased, but such discussion is very, very premature — ranking as little more than a pipe dream.”