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After 50 years of collaboration,
Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt
are musical theatre's indisputable

Golden Boys



Tom Jones (left) and Harvey Schmidt strike a pose in front of *The Fantasticks* drape at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in 1970. Above, Schmidt (middle) and Jones (right) are shown after accepting SETC's Distinguished Career Award from President Joe Filippo (left).



Annie Peterson

by Marisa Marsey

I wondered how they would do it. As keynote speakers at the Southeastern Theatre Conference's 51st annual convention in Norfolk, would Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, award-winning creators of *The Fantasticks*, *110 In The Shade* and other musical theatre gems, share the podium? Bob for the microphone in A-B-A-B cadence? Have one plunge into a charming anecdote, and the other polish it off with a punch?

None of the above. They addressed the gathering in the ballroom individually, Schmidt first. "I'm not a speaker," he apologizes, unfolding a piece of paper. "So I've written some notes."

"Tell them you're Harvey," Jones prods from the front row.

"Oh, right," says Schmidt sheepishly. "I'm Harvey."

They might not be joined at the hip, but after half a century of collaboration, they are as connected as a happily married couple. ("With notable differences," stresses Jones. "Be sure to put that in for my wife.") They finish each other's sentences, fill in each other's memories. Tease and compliment each other. But most importantly, they give each other breathing room. Space to grow apart. That's probably why the two have toiled in tandem so successfully for so long in a business notorious for soured partnerships.

Discussing their harmonious collaborations the day they received SETC's Distinguished Career award, Jones, the wordsmith, explains, "We work together, even when we're separated by time, space, oceans."

"Even when I was in the army," Schmidt jumps in. "Tom would send me lyrics. I'd work out some notes and have my buddies sing it."

"And Harvey travels a lot, so it seems we've always worked miles apart," says Jones.

In the early days they did try writing songs together at the piano. Too many arguments ensued. "In that way it is the same as marriage," allows Jones. "Who gets to make the final decision?"

They preserved the union par avion. "One person sends the other something, and you have to respond to it," says Schmidt.

"We go back and forth, pinning an idea down,"

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Top: Mary Martin and Robert Preston appear in the original production of *I Do! I Do!*



Bottom: The original cast members of *The Fantasticks* are shown in a 1960 photo. The play, which opened in May 1960 at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in New York, is the longest running musical in the world and the longest running show of any kind in American theatre history.

Heads Up

Jones & Schmidt first worked together on an annual musical revue (featuring the original work "*Hipsy-Boo!*") at the University of Texas at Austin. Classmate Word Baker, who would later direct *The Fantasticks*, gave bald-headed men free front-row tickets, an innovative form of footlights. The show was a sell-out smash, causing guys to shave their heads to get seats.

Robert Benton

Remembering

"I always swear I never wrote the music to 'Try To Remember,'" says Schmidt. "I didn't even have a piano then. I was working as a graphic artist for NBC doing titles, and I stopped at Nola Studios on W. 57th Street. It was very hot and I took off my jacket, my Brooks Brothers, the only one I had, and draped it over the chair. I was playing something real jazzy, real cacophonous and took a break. Then I thought, I'm paying for this room and this Steinway piano, and I sat down and out came 'Try To Remember.' I thought it was 'Streets of Laredo' or some other song. I always thought I was going to run into it somewhere, at a cafe in Paris, walking down the street somewhere." Jones interjects: "That's why people like it. It has an instant sense of memory."

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adds Jones. "It's like a mini-deadline."

"Of course, now we talk more," says Schmidt.

"And fax more," says Jones.

Mountains of mail. Sky-high phone bills. Stacks of faxes. Give and take. And give. The system works.

Sometimes a project begins with Jones penning the words, sometimes with Schmidt painting the notes. "My Cup Runneth Over," a show tune Ed Ames is famous for recording, began as a phrase percolating in Jones's brain. "Try to Remember" from *The Fantasticks*, their first hit, flowed from Schmidt's fingertips onto a rented Steinway keyboard in one sitting.

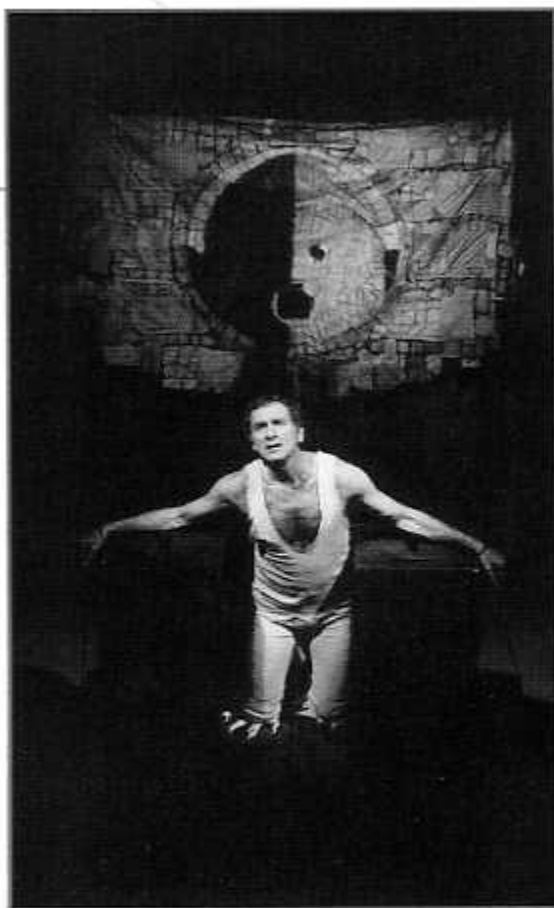
His timing was perfect. The duo had been working on the show, suggested by Edmund Rostand's play *Les Romanesques*, in the Rodgers and Hammerstein mold. It was collapsing under its own weight. They'd pictured it with horses and ranches and an Anglo-Espagnol tension. Sort of like *West Side Story* before *West Side Story*. When Word Baker, a college chum, asked if they could write something in two weeks for a Barnard College summer production, they decided to simplify it.

Schmidt's melody led Jones to the words, "Try To Remember." Jones notes that "if you have remember, you naturally go to September and if you have September, you have to go to December. That means the change of seasons, and that began to tie in with what we were trying to do with the show and clarified what it was all about."

And then some. The irresistible, verse-immersed, groundbreaking show shattered all records, becoming the longest playing musical in the world and the most frequently produced. A marathoner, it still runs at New York's Sullivan Street Playhouse where it opened in 1960. Why is it so enduring, so endearing?

"The lyrics," deadpans Jones. "No, if we knew the answer, we'd write one every week."

Poetically, these kings of collaboration, whose theatrics colored the second half of 20th century theatre, met on the set of a revue celebrating the first. The place was the University of Texas in Austin. The time was 1950. Jones was a graduate student, big man on campus, president of the Curtain Club, an organization encouraging non-theatre majors to get involved in shows. Schmidt was an art student who thought



Dick Lattessa appears as Cockian, a role for which he won a 1975 Obie Award, in *Philemon*. The play, which won the Outer Critics Circle Award, was the most successful of those produced by Jones-Schmidt's workshop theatre, *Portfolio*.

he would pitch in when he heard they needed a piano player.

"I had to act for the audition, too, and I still remember my scene from *Golden Boy*. I tried to be tough and do a Brooklyn accent," recalls Schmidt. "Tom was nice. He didn't snicker."

"I waited until after he left the room," completes Jones.

Before long, the two were a team. "I'm still not sure why Tom picked me, probably because he could tell I was a weakling he could run all over," muses Schmidt. "But here was this drama department bigwig giving me music and every day I would walk across that big campus humming it."

That premier joint venture, "The Freshman Song," is now the finale in *The Show Goes On*, a musical revue they presented in New York in 1998 and are honoring for Laguna Playhouse next year.

"He thought I was brilliant," chuckles Tom. "And I was — as brilliant as one seems to one who is two years younger in college."

Their lifestyles were different, their tastes were different, but they liked and disliked the same theatre,

Distinguished Career Award

had the same vocabulary and came from the same university. So they went to New York together — and never dreamed they'd work with each other this long. (Heck, they've already got a decade on Henry and Mortimer, the actors in *The Fantasticks* who introduce themselves as having been together 40 years.)

While making beautiful music with Jones, Schmidt pursued a successful career as an artist. Big-name magazines sent him around the world, painting faces and places to accompany momentous stories. He covered the World Series in Los Angeles, the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest, deep sea diving in the Caribbean. He still finds inspiration in new and different places. "I'm headed to Atlanta after Norfolk," he says. "I plan to walk up and down Peachtree Street humming."

"Don't get arrested, Harvey," cracks Jones.

One pivotal day, though, pinpointed Schmidt's priorities. He had just landed a plum assignment with *Sports Illustrated* to accompany the shah of Iran

on a tiger hunt and capture the elegant event on canvas. An hour later came the call that Richard Nash had handpicked Jones and Schmidt to do the musical version of his acclaimed book *The Rainmaker*, with David Merrick producing. Both jobs had to start immediately. Schmidt chose Broadway, and the result, *110 in the Shade*, earned the collaborators a Tony nomination for best composer and lyricist in 1964.

More triumphs followed — some together, some apart. Schmidt continued with painting and graphic design. Jones wrote a book called *Making Musicals*; Schmidt's artwork adorns its cover. Jones wed choreographer Janet Watson and had two sons (now 15 and 12). Through it all, the music makers became masters of not just putting it together (with all due respect to Mr. Sondheim), but keeping it together.

"Somewhere, though, midway into the collaboration, I felt the collaboration was in trouble," divulges Jones.

"You did?" asks a surprised Schmidt.

Teams to Watch

Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt are fans of other collaborators, including:

John Kander and Fred Ebb

(Cabaret, Chicago)

David Shire and

Richard Matlby

(Baby; Starting Here, Starting Now; Closer Than Ever)

Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford

(I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road)



Thinking of writing a musical?

Take a page from these successful collaborators' book and follow, follow, follow...

"Let it spring from a work that already exists. It's incredibly difficult to create everything from scratch." - Tom Jones

"Ugly ducklings make for more interesting shows than your grade A classic things. If you get something in the public domain or something no one wants, it's better. Some people spend a lot of time and their life savings on something, then the time runs out on it." - Harvey Schmidt

"I felt enormous stress at the end of Portfolio," relates Jones.

For eight years in a wonderful old building in midtown Manhattan, Jones and Schmidt engaged in Portfolio, what they retrospectively call their insane, egomaniacal experiment to create totally original work. "It's hard enough to write musicals that work, but then to do them in new, avant-garde ways and then to expect them to be smashes," says Jones, shaking his head.

"But bottom line, we did some beautiful stuff," says Schmidt.

You can sing that again. *Celebration. Philemon.*

"Probably what you were feeling was exhaustion," offers Schmidt.

"Well, I felt a lot of pressure," says Jones.

Whatever it was, they survived it. As well as Jones's dalliance with another part-



Ray Stewart and John Cunningham appear in *The Bone Room*, one of Portfolio's experimental musicals.

ner to create *The Game of Love*. Of course, it was Jacques Offenbach, close to a century old by then. "I had no conflicts," reminisces Jones. "And I took all the royalties."

"Other people asked me to collaborate with them," says Schmidt.

"They did?" Jones raises his eyebrows.

"But I didn't have any interest. Heck, I haven't that much interest in doing musicals period," laughs Schmidt. "I would never have done theatre if Tom hadn't invited me."

Scores of musical lovers should be glad

Jones extended the offer — and Schmidt accepted. At 72 and 70, they're as energized as ever about their work. Just this February they were in the studio recording a new project, *Roadside*, based on the book by Lynn Riggs (who also authored *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the basis for *Oklahoma!*). The partners had actually started toying with it before *The Fantasticks*. In other words, nearly 50 years ago.

Such longevity in a no-fault, disposable world begs comparison with *I Do! I Do!*, which netted them Tony nominations for best composer and lyricist and best musical in 1967. Adapted from Jan de Hartog's play *The Fourposter*, it rolls out 50 years of one couple's marriage — the stresses, the strains, the comedic moments throughout. "In effect, that was our musical about collaboration," states Jones. He recalls its last song, a simple number that the husband

and wife sing as they're about to move from the house they've shared for so long. They reflect that though it's been far from easy, their union has been a very good thing, filling the home with life and love.

"You know, we're not people who like to move," says Jones, latching on to the house theme. "Maybe that's why we've stayed together this long."

"I had the same apartment in New York for 40 years," affirms Schmidt, who only recently returned to Texas, having purchased his grandfather's farm there.

"And collaboration is like owning a house. If the plumbing breaks down, you don't move. You just fix it," Jones says, quickly adding: "Not that our plumbing ever broke, Harvey."

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