

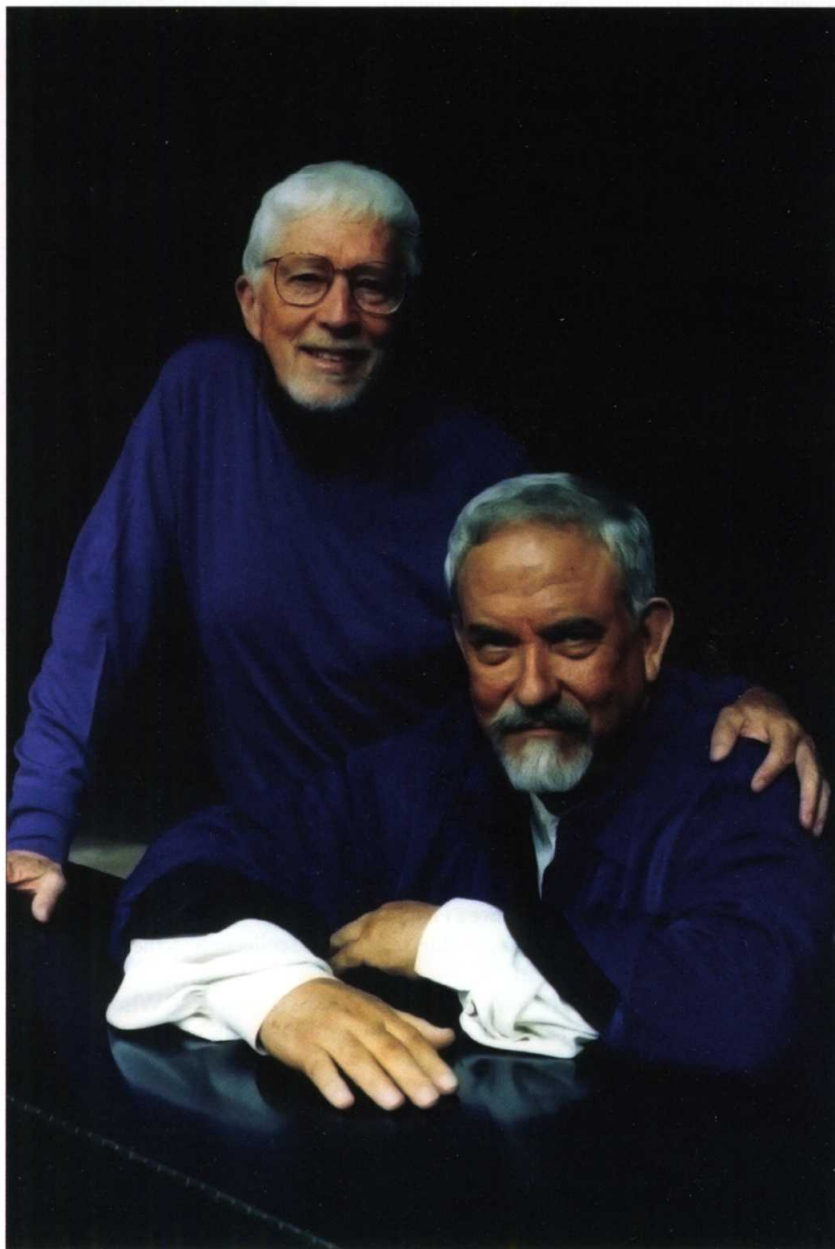
# HIS CUP RUNNETH OVER

**93-Year-Old  
Tom Jones Launches  
Major Online Archive  
and Plans a Daring  
New Version of  
*The Fantasticks***

BY ROBERT VIAGAS

**T**om Jones' hair may be gray and he sometimes uses a stick when he walks. But the 93-year-old writer of the longest-running musical in history speaks with a voice full of plans for more musicals, and with a head still teeming with scenes, songs and stage magic.

Sitting in an enclosed porch that looks out at the woods outside his home in rural northwestern Connecticut, the lyricist of a dozen musicals, including *110 in the Shade*, *I Do! I Do!* and the ineffable *The Fantasticks* is buzzing with projects. He's helping create an online treasury of his work with his longtime collaborator, the late composer Harvey Schmidt. He's seeking a publisher for his new memoir. He's polishing a new musical based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. And he recently signed-off on a dramatic new version of *The Fantasticks*, in which the lovers are played by two young men.



“I think this is one of the most productive, and maybe *the* most productive period of my life,” Jones said. “I cannot explain it.”

His wife, *Big River* choreographer Janet Watson, died in 2016. Both his sons are grown and now, “my life is going over to my computer.” Working on these new projects “has been a wonderful opportunity for me.”

### Mr. Off-Broadway

For those not familiar with Jones & Schmidt’s oeuvre, they both are sons of Texas and met while students at the University of Texas at Austin. They contributed songs to two wildly successful student shows and realized that they could possibly make it as partners in songwriting.

Following stints in the U.S. Army, they settled in New York. After several years of struggle, they began writing songs for the stylish Julius Monk night club revues, notably *Demi-Dozen* in 1958. Among other contributions was the comedy anthem “Mr. Off-Broadway,” about their adventures in the nascent movement that combined small theatres and big subjects.

They didn’t know how prescient the title of that song would be.

Jones and Schmidt began their ascent to fame in the summer of 1959 when a friend, Word Baker, was hired to direct a triptych of short plays at Barnard College in Manhattan. He had an open slot on the program and asked the team if they were ready to show a project they’d been working on for some years. Saddled with the unappetizing title *Joy Comes to Dead Horse*, it was an *Oklahoma!*-style Western musical set in Texas, involving a romance between an Anglo boy and a Latina girl. The girl’s name? Maria.

But after *West Side Story* their hearts broke a bit. Too close. When Baker asked about the project, they decided to go a different route. They stripped the show down to essentials. The planned chorus of cowboys on horseback was gone. The detailed sets and colorful ethnic costumes, gone. The central couple became a generic boy and girl (her name was now Luisa). The narrator was still named El Gallo, but Jones peeled away the “Western” title and applied the title of one of the English translations, *The Fantasticks*.



Opposite page: Tom Jones & Harvey Schmidt in *The Show Goes On* (1998). Photo by Ed Krieger

This page, top: “The Freshman Song” record cover showing Schmidt and Jones, circa 1950. Photo courtesy Dan Shaheen

This page, bottom: The original 1960 cast of *The Fantasticks*, including Jerry Orbach (top), and Tom Jones (billed as Thomas Bruce) wearing mask at right. Photo by by Robert Benton



Jones and Schmidt at their  
experimental workshop  
Portfolio, circa 1970.  
Photo by Robert Alan Gold

After a rocky start, including a move to Off-Broadway's Sullivan Street Playhouse and an expansion from one act to two, the show opened on May 3, 1960, creating two standards "Try to Remember" and "Soon It's Gonna Rain" and gradually building into the longest running show Off-Broadway, then in all of New York and finally the world. It closed in 2002 after 17,162 performances. By contrast, Broadway's longest running show, *The Phantom of the Opera*, stood at 13,370 as of the COVID-19 shutdown.

Jones and Schmidt had, at last, really become "Mr. Off-Broadway."

They went on to write scores for two modest mainstream Broadway hits as well, *110 in the Shade* (they finally got their Western) in 1963 and *I Do! I Do!* (starring Robert Preston and Mary Martin) in 1966. But they longed to return to the experimental days of Julius Monk's revues and the idiosyncratic little *The Fantasticks*. They wanted to take some chances and go out on a limb.

They rented a former church on West 47th Street just west of the Broadway theatre district and opened their own private experimental theatre lab, Portfolio. During its less than a decade of existence, it generated three musicals that got full productions, *The Bone Room* (about male menopause), *Philemon* (about an early Christian martyr) and *Celebration*, a ritualistic theatrical allegory about the battle between winter and summer. *Celebration* moved to Broadway where it ran 109 performances.

After they closed *Portfolio*, the team worked for the next few decades on two projects that never came fully to fruition: *Colette*, based on the life and works of the French writer, and *Grover's Corners*, a musical adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. They worked on two more musicals together: *Mirette*, done at Goodspeed Musicals and elsewhere, and *Roadside*, done at the York Theatre Company. Schmidt, increasingly ill, retired back to Texas, and passed away in 2018. Jones continues to work.

### **The Passage of Time**

Jones and Schmidt once tried to find a philosophical through-line in their work for a revue called *The Show Goes On*. They came up with a serious answer: time. How the passage of time gives so much, but also takes away so much.

Their best-known song, "Try to Remember," is a call to travel in your mind back to a more innocent time. *The Fantasticks* is also an allegory of passing days and seasons. Act I is cool and played by moonlight. Act II is "burned and burnished by the sun."

The team examined time and aging in show after show: *I Do! I Do!* covers a married couple's span of 50 years from the day the young husband and wife cross their threshold, until age calls on them to cross in the other direction. *Celebration* is a war between youth and age. *Colette* is elegiac. *Grover's Corners*, their musicalization of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, jumps forward and backward in time to show how the most mundane actions in a small New Hampshire town are actually the most profound.

Time is very much on Jones' mind of late, since Schmidt passed away and Jones marked his 93rd birthday.

"It's truly the thing I've written about most," he said.

Has his attitude changed toward it?

He answered, "Harvey and I once wrote a song called 'Time Is My Friend' which has never been heard anywhere":

*When I was an eager young boy,  
Time was my friend.  
Time was my friend.  
Each day was an age  
Without any end.  
Time was my finest friend.  
Every day went drifting, lazy—  
Never gone too soon.  
I could do a whole year's dreaming  
In an afternoon.*

*When I was a middle-aged man,  
Time was my foe.  
Time was my foe.  
I'd reach for a day  
And off it would go.  
Time was my bitter foe.  
I tried to organize my time,  
To tell it what to do.  
But I could barely  
Start the morning,  
Then the day was through.*

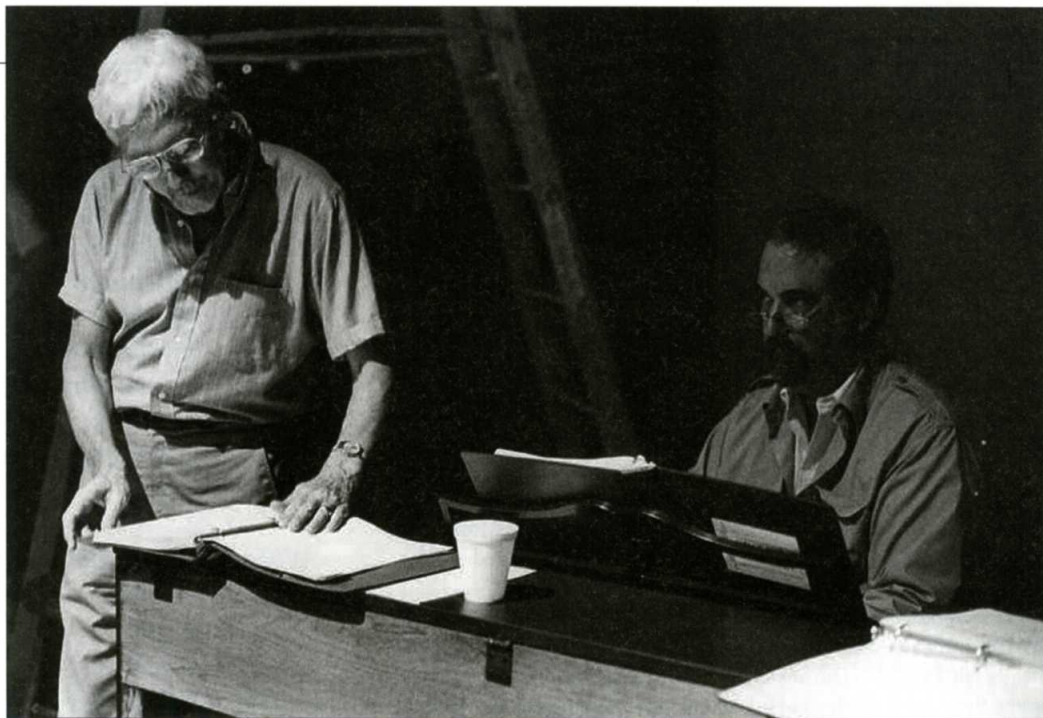
*But now I'm a wise old man  
And Time is my friend.  
Friendly again.  
I've found a way  
Of treating time  
So, we can be friends again.  
I never try to hurry Time,  
To tell it where or when.  
I say to each day  
Do as you may,  
And now we are friends again.*

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"I wrote that years and years ago—years and years and years and decades and decades and decades ago," Jones said. "But it turned out to be prescient because I do feel now that I am friendlier with time."

### **Round and Round**

*The Fantasticks* is the story of two fathers, old friends, who live in adjoining houses. They want to make sure their two children grow up to fall in love and marry. But they believe that if the kids know their plan, they will reject each other. So, the fathers pretend to feud. They build a wall to separate their houses, ex-



This page: Jones and Schmidt in rehearsal for *Grover's Corners*. Photo by Dawn Murray

Opposite page, top: Mary Martin and Robert Preston in the opening scene of the Broadway production of *I Do! I Do!* (1966). Photo by Friedman-Abeles

Opposite page, bottom: Jones recreating his role as the Old Actor in the 2006 revival of *The Fantasticks*. Photo by Joan Marcus

pecting that the young people will rebel, find a way around the wall and fall in love. And that's exactly what happens...until the fathers launch their scheme to end the fake feud.

Jones created the role of the Old Actor (a.k.a. Henry Albertson) in the original production, under the stage name Thomas Bruce. He can be heard briefly on the original cast album. He reprised the role in the 2006 Off-Broadway revival and can be heard much more extensively on that recording.

Nevertheless, Jones has tried to change with the times. Despite its phenomenal success, *The Fantasticks* has been subject to Jones' rewrites through the years, some changes amount to tinkering—a word here, a turn of phrase there. But some have been major.

For a national tour of the show that starred Robert Goulet, the team wrote him a new song “This Is the Perfect Time to Be in Love.”

The most controversial change was their writing a new song to replace El Gallo's “It Depends on What You Pay,” which makes extensive use of the word “rape” to describe the fathers' plans to stage a pretend abduction of Luisa so Matt can seem to rescue her and end the make-believe feud. The script made clear that it was to be a “rape” only in the classical sense of a kidnapping, and a phony one at that. But as audience sensibilities changed, there was simply no longer any acceptable way to explain the word “rape.” Several versions of a new song, “Abduction,” were written to take its place. It covers the same comic territory but makes no mention of “rape.”

Jones also changed the final spoken lines in the show. For most of its existence it ended with one of the fathers saying, “Let's tear down the wall.” To which El Gallo warned, “Leave the wall. Remember, you must always leave the wall.”

Audiences down the years found the line to be resonant and significant. Jones did not. “Within a few years after we opened, and I got to know the show better,” Jones said. “I realized that it isn't about the wall at all.”

Upon consideration, Jones decided to change El Gallo's rejoinder to “It was never about the wall.”

But original producer Lore Noto said “he would file lawsuit because, he believed, that was what the whole show is about. So, it stayed the way it was until we were able to change it [in the 2006 revival].”

Jones has made so many changes over the years that he's wound up on the radar of Music Theatre International, which licenses the rights for *The Fantasticks* and manages the official version of the script. Jones said, “Music Theatre got so tired of me changing things that they won't let me change anything anymore.”

### Gay Fantasticks

Nevertheless, coming up this fall is perhaps the biggest retailoring of the classic yet. Jones personally rewrote the show to make the Boy (Matt) and the Girl (Luisa) into two young men, Matt and Louis, including strategic rewriting to accommodate the gender change. The new version is scheduled to premiere December 3-19 at the Flint Repertory Theatre in Flint, MI.

Flint Producing Artistic Director Michael Lluberes said, “It's going to be a true re-invention of this great classic musical. And [Jones] has been so open about experimenting with it— I've been so impressed with his openness at age [93] to explore new things in this seminal work—it's been an amazing experience so far.”

Jones said, “It was fun to do. Interestingly, a lot of the rewriting involved the fact that the two fathers are now two mothers. When I adapted the story originally from Rostand's *Les Romanesques*, which has kind of a Comédie-Française/ Commedia dell'arte background, probably the most lines that I took from anybody were for the fathers, actually. A lot of their lines are exactly the lines from the original French and its English translation, the one that was called *The Fantasticks*. So, in doing the mothers [for the new version], I just gave them their own voices their own speeches and so forth.”

An example of the rewrite for the aforementioned song “Abduction”:

*Abduction, abduction  
Theatrical abduction...  
An abduction that's emphatic  
An abduction that's polite  
An abduction done on roller skates  
It's really quite a sight!  
An abduction done on horseback  
Hi-yo Silver and away!  
So, you see this sort of thing depends on what you pay  
It depends on what you pay.*

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Jones said, "There's a nice little scene when the mothers engage El Gallo [to stage the abduction]. When he finds out that they're talking about two boys, he says, 'Are you worried about that?' And one of the mothers replies, 'They love each other, what do we have to worry about?' Coming up with that was fun."





## Celebration

Two major projects currently occupying Jones, apart from the creation of the website, is his planned memoir, "Trying to Remember," which recounts the fun two demi-hayseeds from Texas had in the New York City café society of the 1950s and 1960s, and a new musical, *Prospera*, based on William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Previously titled *La Tempesta*, the new show, with music by Andrew Gerle, had a fully-staged production in Japan. Jones changed the title when he decided on another non-traditional casting choice: to make the wizard *Prospero* a woman.

And as of July 12, 2021 Jones added a big change to his personal cast list. He saw the birth of his late-life first grandchild, Georgia Jones, with whom he expressed delight.

## Jones and Schmidt's Last Song

This past summer, as Jones was working on his latest revision of his *Harold and Maude* musical, two ideas came together in his head. One was based on a Native American chant about a dead person not really being in a burial ground, but in the memories of the people who knew her or him. It came together with a piece of music Schmidt had written decades earlier.

"It's one of the most beautiful melodies that Harvey ever wrote," Jones said. "It has a wonderful, beautiful, simple, evocative musical theme. I had tried for 50 years to come up with a lyric that could match the beauty and simplicity of his gorgeous, gorgeous melody."

The words "Don't look for me here" "sat" perfectly on the first line of music, and soon the rest of the lyric fell into place. Instead of *Harold and Maude*, Jones decided to use it in yet another current project, a musical revue titled *The Magic Circle*. "I think it's the last song we [Schmidt and Jones] will have written together," Jones said.

Here is Jones' last lyric for a Harvey Schmidt song, written in summer 2021, and published here for the first time:

This page: Schmidt and Jones at the University of Texas (2010) where they were being honored.

Opposite page, top: Jones and Schmidt in *The Show Goes On* (1998). Photo by Carol Rosegg

Opposite page, bottom: Jones and Schmidt watching rehearsals for *Mirette* (1996) at Goodspeed at Chester. Photo courtesy Dan Shaheen

*Don't look for me here,  
Not here by this marker.  
Don't look for me here,  
Not under this mound.  
Just open your eyes,  
And look all around you.  
Just open your heart,  
And I will be found.*

*That bird in the sky  
That flies by you, singing—  
That soft summer breeze,  
That trembles the trees—  
Those cold winter nights  
When stars start to sparkle—  
They're all part of me  
And I'm part of these.*

*That laughter you share,  
I'm part of that laughter.  
Those tears that you shed,  
I'm part of them too.  
Don't look for me here,  
Not here in this graveyard.  
How can I be dead  
When I'm part of you?*

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"I'm so happy that it turned out OK," Jones said. "The subject matter is perfect for the character, but it's speaking also for myself, really." 🍷

# Preserving Jones & Schmidt

*Encore Magazine* visited Jones at his country house which he hasn't left since the advent of COVID-19. As a precaution, he has rarely entertained visitors. Most of his work on the new online archive JonesandSchmidt.com has been conducted via email. The site was scheduled to go live in early September 2021.

Dan Shaheen, who is spearheading construction of the website project, said, "The website is a comprehensive portfolio of historical information about Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt and their shows. It includes recordings, interviews, reviews, writings, poems, photos, and films, from the first song they wrote together in college, in 1951 ('The Freshman Song'), to their last song collaboration ('Don't Look for Me Here'), which has never been heard before. (See main story.) In addition to their work together, there is a section for each of them individually which includes Tom's recent video reminiscences about the shows, and his work with other composers, as well as Harvey's solo piano recordings, and imagery from his incredible career as a much-awarded graphic artist."

Among many other posters, magazine illustrations and record jackets, Schmidt designed the distinctive logo of *The Fantasticks* itself. He also personally hand-painted that logo on the China silk curtain that hung on the stage of the Sullivan Street Playhouse during the show's original 42-year Off-Broadway run plus the 11-year revival run. Anyone who ever received a letter or envelope from Schmidt in the mail got a wonderful keepsake: their name and address hand-written in that same spiky freehand.

Shaheen, who works with Jones and oversees the Schmidt Intellectual Property Trust, said he launched the project because he felt it was important to create the Jones and Schmidt website now.

"People get most of their information online, and there's so much about Tom and Harvey that people don't know and can't easily find—information not only about their work together, in the course of their 65-year partnership, but work they did with other collaborators or in other genres. Because I'd worked closely with Jones and Schmidt since the early '80s, Tom asked me to oversee the project. And I felt it was important to do it now, because while Harvey is gone, Tom is still available to comment and contribute."

In creating the website, Shaheen was assisted by web designer Sue Anschutz and Schmidt's long-time assistant John Schak.

Shaheen said, "One of my goals is keeping Harvey's musical legacy alive." To that end, he has been arranging re-releases of several Jones/Schmidt cast recordings.

Shaheen said there have been many surprises along the way. "In putting it together, I found so many things I'd never seen, never heard, or didn't know, and I'm sure anyone who loves their work, as I do, will find hundreds of things that will delight them."

