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Lives in the theatre

The Educational Theatre Association honors Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt

By Don Corathers



DON CORATHERS

Tom Jones (at left) and Harvey Schmidt offered a few songs from their shows when they accepted Lifetime Achievement Awards from the Educational Theatre Association.

ONE AFTERNOON in August, Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt were sharing a table in a French Quarter restaurant with Jones's teenage son Sam and a writer. The table was cluttered with vacant gumbo bowls, platters of oyster shells, a tape recorder, and two Lifetime Achievement Awards from the Educational Theatre Association, heavy engraved faux-crystal rhomboids celebrating the accomplishments of the men who wrote *The Fantasticks*, *I Do! I Do!*, *110 in the Shade*, and more than forty years worth of other musicals.

What is the secret, the writer wanted to know, to sustaining a productive creative partnership for so long?

Schmidt, the composer of the pair, offered a reply that sounded like an abstract for one of his songwriting partner's lyrics. "Mostly," he said, "it's that time passes very quickly. You just keep working and suddenly you find that you're old."

Jones and Schmidt may have been around a long time, but it is difficult to think of them as old by the evidence of that afternoon at the Educational The-

atre Association convention in New Orleans. An hour earlier they had charmed an audience of high school theatre teachers, accepting the association's first-ever Lifetime Achievement Awards and performing a few tunes from their enormous repertoire. They did five songs, including their most famous one, "Try to Remember," and a number from a pre-*Fantasticks* revue, and one from their latest musical, a return to their Texas roots called *Roadside*.

The Jones-Schmidt partnership dates from 1950, when they collaborated on a college musical called *Hipsy-Boo* while they were undergraduates at the University of Texas. A few years later they were both living in New York. Schmidt, a talented illustrator, was busy with lucrative magazine assignments; Jones was struggling financially, working in a bookstore and teaching drama at a community center. They continued to work on songs together and assembled a portfolio that they hoped to turn into a revue.

One project they kept coming back to through the 1950s was a musical adaptation of a play by Edmond Rostand called *Les Romanesques*, the story of two lovers whose fathers contrive to bring together by pretending to want to keep them

'Fantasticks' closing

THE SULLIVAN STREET THEATER production of *The Fantasticks*, which has been going for more than forty years and which seemed destined to run forever, will close early in January.

Producer Lore Noto, who has been with the show since it opened on May 3, 1960—more than 17,000 performances ago—said the longest-running musical will close on January 13. For the first time in its

history, the show has been operating at a loss this year.

Noto announced plans to close *The Fantasticks* once before when the box office was slumping, in 1986, but the closing notice stimulated ticket sales and the record-setting run continued. It seems unlikely that will happen again.

"Our business has just about collapsed," the producer told *The New York Times*. "The signs are there. It can't go on forever."

apart. In 1959, Word Baker, who had directed their college shows, approached Jones and Schmidt with a proposition. The actress Mildred Dunnock was mounting a three-show professional summer season at Barnard College. If they could get that Rostand thing into shape as a one-act musical in the next three weeks, he would direct it. They did, and he did, and that's how *The Fantasticks*, which was expanded and moved downtown the following spring and has been running ever since, was born.

That show, which has played the 153-seat Sullivan Street Theater for forty-one years, is the longest-running musical in history and quite possibly the most-produced one among schools and community theatres. It is also the foundation of its creators' careers. Impresario David Merrick was dating the woman playing Louisa early in the run, and it occurred to him that Jones and Schmidt might be the right guys to work on his next project, a musical adaptation of Richard Nash's play *The Rainmaker*. The result, *110 in the Shade*, introduced the writing team to Broadway, where the show had a ten-month run in 1963. There followed *I Do! I Do!* (1966), *Celebration* (1969), *Colette* (1970), and *Philemon* (1975).

In the late sixties Jones and Schmidt established the Portfolio Studio, a place where they could concentrate on the small, simple, intimate pieces that interested them most, austere works that demand the audience bring their imagination to the theatre with them. *The Fantasticks* was an expression of that impulse. Jones said the closest he and his partner came to realizing their musical ideal was *Grover's Corners*, their 1987 adaptation of *Our Town*. It opened in Chicago but has been denied a fuller life by the reluctance of Thornton Wilder's estate to extend its grant of rights to the original work.

After the awards presentation and their performance, and before they spent forty minutes autographing programs, CDs, and table favors, Jones and Schmidt fielded questions from the audience of a couple hundred high school theatre teachers. One wondered

what they would advise her to tell her students who wanted to pursue writing careers in the theatre.

"First thing," said Jones, "begin working with friends and getting lined up with people, because you can only depend on yourself, ultimately, and your own group that you find, and make your own thing. And the second part of my advice is to try not to become tarnished, not to become cynical, in what is a very cruel, cynical world."

"I think the main thing is the doing of it," Schmidt offered. "Whatever lack of skills you may think you have, or opportunities that aren't there, just get out and do it. If you want to write musicals, just start writing, and somehow get it put on, in your neighborhood or wherever. It's the doing of it that counts, over and over again."

"I'd just like to say one other thing about that," Jones added. "As your work becomes increasingly august and important, don't forget where you came from,

folks. There's got to be some fun in there, some joy in there, and not just importance."

Later, at lunch, I asked a question that seemed appropriate to the occasion: why is theatre important? Why should a talented young person shoot for a lifetime achievement award in theatre, as opposed to medicine, or engineering, or the military?

"The ideal thing for anybody is to do what they love, and very few people actually do that in life," Schmidt answered. "New York is full of people who absolutely love the theatre. They may not have had a role for twenty years, but they still say they're actors and if they get a moment on stage it's worth it to them, it means that much to them. It requires that kind of dedication. But I think it's great if everybody could just end up doing what they love."

Jones, who had been giving me a gruesome fisheye as he listened to the question, considered it for a moment after lis-

tening to his friend's answer, and delivered the following speech:

"The question implies the larger question, why do the arts? The arts help us understand who we are and why we are living. The arts are a natural part of the human condition. The arts are natural to us, just as natural as killing, maybe even more so.

"You can capture something that's inside people and put it in a form that expresses it for them as well as for yourself. For example, in a musical you can capture all of these rich emotional things we all have inside that don't usually come out of us. We most of us don't have ways to express many of the things that we are feeling. But once they're captured they can be held on to and they mean something to people. You can present them. If religion has meaning, or philosophy has meaning, then art has meaning, and certainly drama has meaning. And also it's more fun sometimes.

"My own attraction, which is clearly dangerous in our day and time, is for the living stage, and that's where you really get into a lot of problems in terms of survival, just because of supply and demand. But the thing that I am drawn to is this human direct thing, and the power within that. There is magic there.

"I often make the comparison: it's very much like sitting by a fire in a fireplace. You know, it's not the most practical way to heat a room. But it touches something in our species, it connects with something, you know what I mean, and releases certain kinds of thoughts and ruminations. And I think that's true of theatre, too. Nowadays you can get electric heat and gas heat, and you can get a videocassette of a fireplace. Have you ever seen those? You see the flames, hear the sound, the crackling fireplace, but it's not the same thing. There's something about having this primitive thing in our world that's the ultimate kind of luxury of human connection."