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## Forever Young And Fantastick

The Legendary Tom Jones Chats Up His  
Role as Co-creator of "The Fantasticks,"  
Being Staged in New Canaan

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Tom Jones performs as Henry in "The Fantasticks" with his look-alike puppet.  
PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS



Forever Young and

# *Fantastick*

WHEN WRITER CHARLES HIX DISCOVERED THAT THE TOWN PLAYERS OF NEW CANAAN WERE STAGING A PRODUCTION OF ONE OF THE MOST EXQUISITE MUSICAL LOVE STORIES, HE RECALLED THE FIRST TIME HE SAW “THE FANTASTICKS” BACK IN THE ‘60S. WHEN HE REALIZED THAT TOM JONES, THE CO-CREATOR OF “THE FANTASTICKS” ALSO LIVED IN CONNECTICUT AND WAS WORKING ON A REVIVAL OF THE SHOW, HE TRACKED HIM DOWN TO CHAT UP THIS CLASSIC. »



» TOM JONES REMAINS ACUTELY aware of standing before television cameras from around the globe on January 13, 2002 – the night that “The Fantasticks,” the much-loved musical for which he wrote the libretto and lyrics, finally closed at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in New York’s Greenwich Village. The historic event transpired 17,162 performances and more than four decades after “The Fantasticks” had opened there with little fanfare on May 3, 1960.

On that long-ago opening night, Jones had enacted the role of Henry/The Old Actor under the name

of Thomas Bruce to insure his anonymity. Now, in 2002, he was no longer anonymous but famously in the center of the spotlight, being honored as the co-creator, with composer Harvey Schmidt, of the world’s longest-running musical. Asked by interviewers to convey his feelings, “I kept saying, ‘It’s wonderful. It’s wonderful,’” he now recalls. “What I really felt was guilt. And shame.” He amplifies his reasons for this astonishing revelation, explaining that through negligence the show had gotten ragged around the edges during its record-breaking run. He adds rue-

fully, “I felt I’d betrayed it.”

Maybe the man is being hyper-critical. In any case, Jones made his amends and more. He has just directed what might be designated a revival of a revival of yet another revival of “The Fantasticks” that opened on June 16 at the 199-seat

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The two fathers conspire to spark a romance between their children by feigning enmity between the two families. The players, Henry and Mortimer, make their entrance out of a stage trunk in the recent New York revival of “The Fantasticks.”

PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS





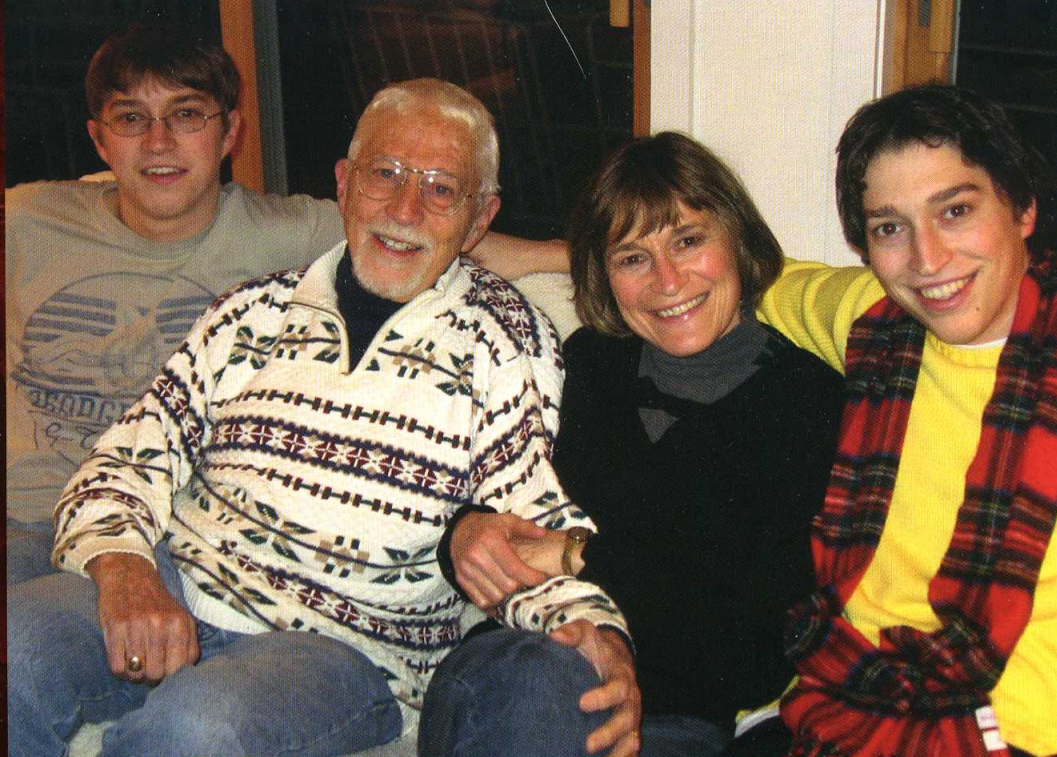
Jerry Orbach Theater in the Snapple Theater Center on West 50th Street in New York City. In a nice touch of synchronicity, the late Jerry Orbach, perhaps best known for playing Detective Lennie Briscoe on the "Law & Order" TV series, originated the role of The Narrator/El Gallo at the cozy, 152-seat Sullivan Street Playhouse back in 1960.

(If the chronology concerning various versions seems complicated, be patient. Even Jones is uncertain about the precise litany of all the multiple milestones associated with "The Fantasticks," one of the most produced stage works in history. Somewhere along the line, his wife — known professionally as Janet Watson — began choreographing productions staged by her husband. The two have had a home in West Cornwall, Connecticut, for many years. Connecticut provides another link this summer when the Town Players of New Canaan present "The Fantasticks.")

This much is easily documented. No so long ago, Jones directed another revival at the Snapple Center. That one opened on July 26, 2006, and closed on February 24, 2008. Finally, with much time, perseverance and dedication, he had shaped the text of "The Fantasticks" to his complete satisfaction — half a century after he first conceived it. "I made significant changes and revisions," he says. Henceforth, this will be the official script for all licensed performances.

During the initial run at the Snapple Center, something else came to fruition. Jones once again reprised his role of Henry/The Old Actor. "I finally got the performance I really liked. I'd grown into it," he says with pride.

Born in Littlefield, Texas, in 1928, Jones discloses that the producers of the latest New York revival "think they can add another



Tom and Janet Jones, shown at their West Cornwall home, are flanked by their sons, Sam and Michael. | PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM JONES' FAMILY.

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10 years or so to the show. Who knows?” His intonation expresses more hope than skepticism. He claims that he won't appear as Henry/The Old Actor any longer.

“I'm getting very old very rapidly,” he says without an iota of self-pity. “I have limited time. I want to write more musicals.”

Specifically, Jones hopes to complete one based on the cult movie “Harold and Maude.” He's toying with creating a children's book.

“And I'd like to do, as everyone does, a memoir. I don't sit around hugging ‘The Fantasticks.’ Really I don't. I'm more interested in new work,” he says.

With partner Schmidt, Jones has written, among other shows, some critically successful, some not, the Broadway hits “110 in the Shade” and “I Do! I Do!” But “The Fantasticks” will forever be their most beloved show in the pantheon of memorable musicals.

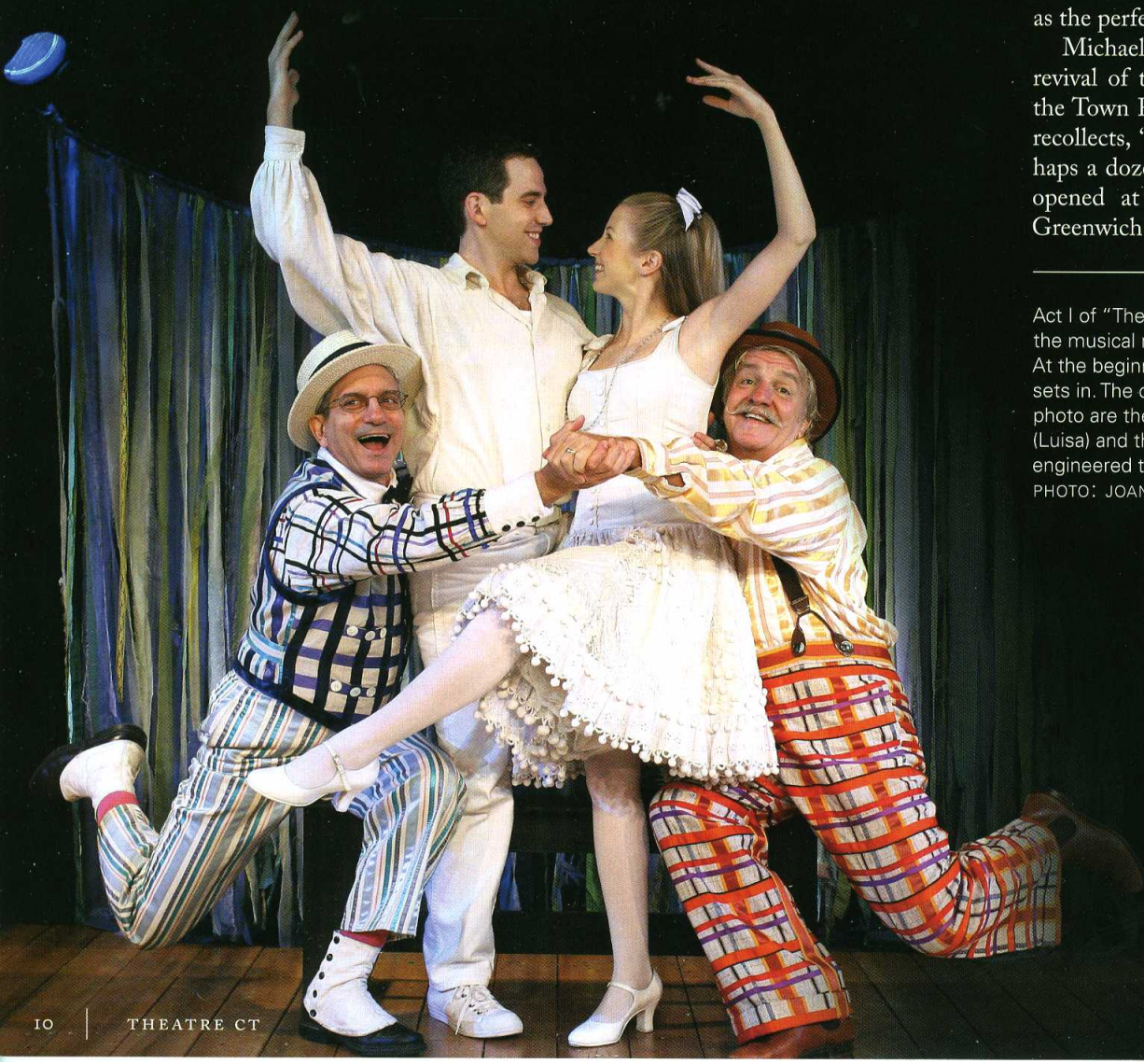
For many mature theater lovers, “The Fantasticks” has served as a rite of passage. Over the years, the deceptively simple ensemble piece has ushered thousands upon »



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MICHAEL DAY



» thousands of inductees into the miraculous world of musical theater. The work has been staged everywhere from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

I recall my very first “Fantasticks” with great clarity and affection. I was a 19-year-old from Michigan when I saw it at the tiny, 152-seat Sullivan Street Playhouse during the summer of 1962. It was my very first live show in New York City, and I was transported. Back home I had listened to the original cast recording time and again, but this was the real thing. As decades passed, I would see more revivals than I can count, but the first time is forever encoded in my memory as the perfect time.

Michael Day, who directs the revival of the legendary show for the Town Players of New Canaan, recalls, “My first time was perhaps a dozen years after the show opened at that little theater in Greenwich Village. I already knew

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Act I of “The Fantasticks” ends with the musical number, “Happy Ending.” At the beginning of Act II, discontent sets in. The characters shown in this photo are the Boy (Matt), the Girl (Luisa) and their two fathers, who engineered their romance.

PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS




the songs, particularly "Try to Remember" and "Soon It's Gonna Rain." Assessing the appeal of "The Fantasticks" for amateur and regional companies, Day remarks, "It's just a simple and beautiful show," one well suited to small, intimate spaces. Appropriately, the New Canaan group's theater-in-the-park venue is a 115-seater.


"I hope the parents are bringing their children," Day volunteers. "This is the perfect show for teens and preteens to see and to get lost in and to have dreams about going into the theater." The production plays at the Powerhouse Theatre, Waveny Park, New Canaan from July 25 through Aug. 9.

A press release for the current New York production describes the premise of the musical this way: "The Fantasticks" tells the story of a young boy and girl who fall madly in love at the hands of their meddling fathers, but soon grow restless and stray from one another. Will their separation provide a deeper appreciation for the love they once shared or create a permanent gulf between them?" Here's a hint at the resolution. The musical's most famous song, "Try to Remember," contains this wise lyric: "Without a hurt the heart is hollow."

*Charles Hix appeared as a featured dancer in a college production of "Guys and Dolls" in 1962. He has been hooked on theater ever since. He even studied acting in New York with Gene Frankel in the early 1970s before becoming a columnist at "Gentlemen's Quarterly" and a syndicated columnist with "United Feature." The author of six books, including two that appeared on The New York Times bestseller lists in 1977 and 1983, Hix has forsaken all stage aspirations.*

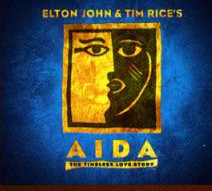


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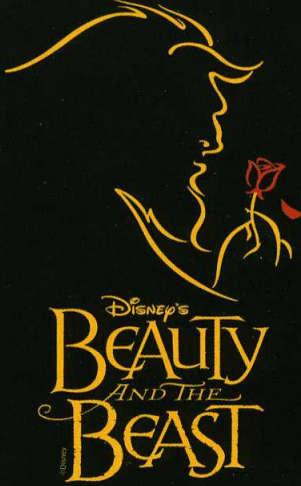


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