

Tempo

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UNDERGROUND WRITER
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 800 feet beneath Manhattan
 in his first novel, "Payback."*

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A friend comes home

Bob Sickinger's 'musical noir' shows that he hasn't lost it

By Richard Christiansen

TRIBUNE CHIEF CRITIC

Early this year, his old Chicago friends received news from Bob Sickinger informing them that he was returning to the city with a new project.

In typical, enthusiastic Sickinger style, the news came not in a mere letter, but in an elaborate broadside, with verse, which spelled out his latest undertaking.

"To My Friends," the verse began:

*If you thought I'd become
 A theatrical ghost in white
 Let it be known*

It's not the kid's last fight

*Since my buddies (Jim) Jacobs ("Grease"),
 (Ralph G.) Allen ("Sugar Babies") & (Polly)
 Pen ("Bed and Sofa") gave it a try*

*And came out flying high
 I figured what the heck
 Why not give it a try
 And to show you that the kid's not through
 I offer for your critical view
 A musical that I wrote
 JUST FOR YOU
 So I hope you'll join me
 For better or worse
 And see what's up the sleeve
 Of this new born verser.*

Yes, Bob Sickinger, the man who virtually invented off-Loop theater in Chicago in the '60s, had created a new musical, writing both book and lyrics and some of the songs in a burst of uncontained energy.

At 69, he still possessed the old fire that he had displayed so brilliantly as director

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Tribune photo by John Kringas

Director Bob Sickinger is surrounded by the cast of his musical "The Blue Angel."

of the old Hull House Theatre in Chicago.

For six years, from 1963-69, Sickinger made the Jane Addams Center at 3212 N. Broadway a center of theatrical innovation. Works by Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco, Bertolt Brecht and a host of English and off-Broadway playwrights had their Chicago debuts there under Sickinger's direction. Playwrights' labs were set up, a children's theater group was formed and more Hull House theaters were established in other parts of the city, including one for the production of musicals.

"He was the most dedicated person in the theater I had ever known," says Mike Nussbaum, the sage Chicago actor-director who appeared in nine shows for Sickinger in those days. "He was almost inarticulate. He would just say 'with it' and 'you know,' and, somehow, we would know. He was willing to work until 4 a.m., and he expected that same kind of commitment from everyone."

Sickinger himself said of that period: "We proved it was possible to create a valid theater out of Chicago. We built it from the streets, and from the actors who lived here. We showed that there were people here who had the talent to create theater. So we had a theater that was about the city, about Chicago. And we were proud."

In 1969, however, embroiled in a dispute with the Hull House trustees and eager to become a movie director, Sickinger left Chicago. The Hull House space endured, once serving as home of Steppenwolf Theatre and now the residence of the Famous Door company. More important, the home-grown theater tradition Sickinger had jump-started into recognition grew to phenomenal proportions.

Sickinger returned to Chicago briefly in 1980 to promote "Love in a Taxi," a small-budget film he had directed, and he came back again in 1989 for a sentimental tribute at Hull House.

But for most of that time he was well out of the theater. He established a telephone answering service in Manhattan in the 1970s, saw it grow into a successful telecommunications business and retired, letting his grown children run the operation.

He professed little interest in theater, but still continued to catch new work, particularly in trips to London.

One of the shows he saw on one of his visits to London was a stage musical based on the famous Marlene Dietrich film of 1930, "The Blue Angel." Written by Pam Gems and directed by Trevor Nunn, the work had done well with the Royal Shakespeare Company but had not been able to find a commercial outlet.

Sickinger was convinced that a good musical could be made from the material, and, undaunted by his inexperience, he decided to have a go at it himself.

"I thought I could at least build the framework of the show," he recalls. "I didn't realize I would be doing all the carpentry and painting work too."

In the end, besides writing the book for the show, he also composed a few of the songs, humming the tunes into a tape recorder and then having them transcribed. New York composer Susan Minsky wrote many of the songs, however; Chicagoans Alaric Jans and June Shellene contributed some work, and additional dramatic material came from writer James Jackson.

Once embarking on his new career as a creator of musicals, Sickinger attacked it with his usual consuming intensity. In addition to "The Blue Angel," he also wrote "Platinum Taps," with composer John Taylor Thomas. He called it "a crackerjack of a musical" and described it as "a shining valentine to Broadway in the 1930s." It was given a production in New Jersey last season which was less than shining, according to its creator.

On the other hand, "The Blue Angel," dubbed "a musical noir" by Sickinger, seemed a perfect choice for musicalization. Set in a 1920s German cabaret, it successfully used music in its film version, with one of its songs, "Falling in Love Again," sung by Dietrich as the cabaret temptress Lola Lola, going on to become a popular hit.

Flushed with excitement about his work, Sickinger sent it out to friends and theater contacts across the country. Nussbaum thought it was "great." Directors Robert Falls and Gregory Mosher both sent encouraging words, with Falls calling it "a vivid and wonderful piece of theater." London actor-director Simon Callow wrote that Sickinger's version was "much punchier" than the Gems-Nunn version.

Better yet, Bailiwick Repertory at 1229 W. Belmont Ave. in Chicago said it wanted to present a concert staging of the musical as part of its 1996-97 season.

Chicago presentation

Sickinger, delighted to have the chance to see the show up on its feet in front of an audience, flew into Chicago early in February, sat in on auditions and eagerly audited the four two-hour rehearsals that director David Zak conducted over a period of 10 days.

Last Tuesday, in what Zak described as "a meeting of theatri-

cal generations, Bailiwick presented the first of four performances of the musical. (The final shows will be given at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday at Bailiwick.)

Rough and unfinished and frequently over-emoted as it was, the concert staging nevertheless showed that Sickinger had not been wrong in his instincts.

His story, telling of the downfall of a strict, priggish professor who is enthralled by and marries a voluptuous saloon singer, captures the two sides of rigid morality and depraved licentiousness often associated with the immediate pre-Hitler years of Germany in the late 1920s; and the songs, ranging from schoolboy anthems of moral purity to Lola Lola's raucous love songs with her Blue Angel chorus girls, are always appropriate to the action and pleasing to the ear.

The cabaret scenes, expertly led at Bailiwick by musical director Eric Svejcar, are reminiscent of the earlier musical "Cabaret," which ironically was inspired in part by "The Blue Angel"; but the contrast that Sickinger creates between the professor's ivory tower intellectual values and the sensual, tough street world of Lola Lola's art gives the show's melodrama an added tension and dimension.

Some of the old Sickinger actors, including Kenneth Northcott and Harvey Rubin, were in "The Blue Angel" cast, and several of his friends and colleagues from the Hull House years were there, too, applauding after each number.

As for Sickinger, he was exactly as he was in the old days, patrolling the lobby before the show, making sure that everyone was comfortably seated and spilling out words of encouragement to the actors at intermission.

Once the Chicago performances are over, he hopes to go on with the musical, pushing it ahead with everything he's got.

"We sent it out to Madonna's people," he says, "because Lola Lola would be perfect for her. I finally got word back that she liked it, but then she went off and made 'Evita.'"

"Oh, well," he adds, "now that that's over, maybe she'll reconsider."

And who knows. Maybe she will.