

The Arts

The New York Times

THURSDAY, JANUARY

WILD PARTY

COLLETTIE PASTOR KITT MANDY PATINKINI

Two Musicals, One Source: A Duel?

Producers Say
Shows Must Go On

By ROBIN POGREBIN

"The Wild Party" featuring Mandy Patinkin and "Wild Party" featuring Taye Diggs? "The Wild Party" written by Andrew Lippa or the one by Michael Chiusa and George C. Wolfe? "The Wild Party" by Manhattan Theater Club that opens Feb. 24 or "The Wild Party" presented by Park Shakespeare Festival/Joseph Papp and several commercial producers that opens on April 6?

It's the confusion that producers of both productions are worried about creating in the market. Both sets of producers find themselves at the League of American Theaters and Producers, which appears to be a first for New York



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

theater: two new musicals inspired by the same source material coming to the stage in the same season.

The work that prompted both productions is the 1928 jazz-era poem "The Wild Party," by Joseph Moncure March. The poem, told in syncopated rhyming couplets, chronicles a sex-infused, liquor-soaked Prohibition-era party that degenerates from hedonism into murder. The poem — improvised by March at age 26 after he resigned as managing editor of *The New Yorker* — was considered too risqué to publish until 1928, when a limited edition was released and then banned in Boston. After producing another poem, "The Set-Up," March went on to write documentaries and to contribute many articles to *The New York Times Magazine* until his death in 1977. A film based on the poem and starring Raquel Welch and James Cagney was released in 1975.

For the time being, both "Wild Party" teams are

playing down the concurrence of the musicals as insignificant coincidence. But when pressed, the producers concede that the timing is unfortunate. "I would like it if it weren't there, but it's there," said Scott Rudin, one of the producers supporting the Public Theater's production. But he added, "You can't run your life by what somebody else is doing."

Those involved recognize that marketing will be crucial to distinguishing between the two productions. "We will have to establish our own visual imagery," Williams said, "essentially branding." The simultaneous appearance of two films or two books on the same subject is common. Several people involved in the "Wild Party" productions commented that there was a time in the 1920's when two "Hot Mikado" productions ran simultaneously, and noted that an alternative "Phantom"

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OFF BROADWAY
Andrew Lippa's "Wild Party": from left, Julia Murney, Taye Diggs, Idina Menzel, Brian d'Arby, James, Gabriel Byrne and Mr. Lippa.

Mr. Varone, himself to be of his swirls and coming arming and try brief mo- reach toward encircle her grasp estab- le, unattain- ritters need

scrutiny, in a quiet and with Mr. Hahn that reveals a gift for physical comedy.

Much has been made of Mr. Varone's humanism. But the two New York premieres that completed the program had an emotional dryness that made it hard to take in their precise plotting and to enjoy Mr. Varone's luxuriating in a choreographic sequence or phrase. The chief pleasure of "Agora" and

into motion, like small and large ships tipping and cutting through a dense sea.

In "Agora," clearly an audience favorite, eight dancers (Nancy Bannon, Daniel Charon, Adriane Fang, Mr. Hahn, Keith Johnson, Mercedes Manago, Mr. Taketa and Ms. Welliver) fold in and out of complex groupings and spinoffs to a score by Julia Wolfe that builds from un-

despite performing the brain, heart and physics an MacDevitt designe The costumes were by The program, which peated on Saturday ternoons, is one of th formed by the compan day at the Joyce (175 E at 19th Street, Chelsea

Musicals, One Source: Producers Say the Shows Must Go

Arts Page

ur Kopit has Andrew Lloyd om of the n Broadway. oject matter er Broadway e were three d Lincoln; in amlet" and ould remem- ith the same e work were g in New

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st hit another mber when o was sup- eading role, ecause of her quickly re- Collette, the st known to r the movies uriel's Wed- Public's pro- ws in March, attan Theater pened.

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way also has thing, it costs — \$5 million — even though one involved rates. (Man- ould not dis- sion.) More- to Broadway often less for- argue that higher than en that his ill- of "On the estimated loss

With mournful voices, they howled that fine

Heart-rending song: "Sweet Adeline."

Their voices wailed from quavering throats

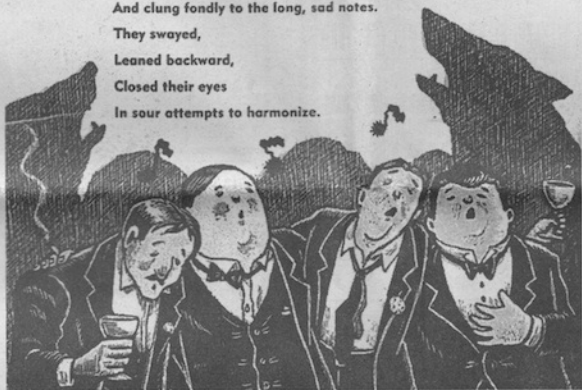
And clung fondly to the long, sad notes.

They swayed,

Closed backward,

Closed their eyes

In sour attempts to harmonize.



Pantheon Books

Part of Joseph March's "Wild Party" with Art Spiegelman's illustration.

other hand, will have the luxury of testing its "Wild Party" on the relatively safer ground of a loyal subscriber audience and can wait to gauge critical support before deciding whether to risk a more costly commercial run.

Sure enough, there are two commercial producers waiting in the wings to do exactly that, Jeffrey Seller and Kevin McCollum, both of whom have long supported Mr. Lippa's work and helped produce the successful rock musical "Rent." But though they provided "enhancement money" to Manhattan Theater Club for its production and said they had secured the commercial rights to the project — meaning the right to transfer the show — Mr. Seller and Mr. McCollum are keeping a low profile. Asked about the show's prospects for a life beyond Manhattan Theater Club, Mr. Seller said: "We don't want to talk about any of that right now. We just want to see the show reach its potential."

Yet Manhattan Theater Club's production is no small undertaking. The cast of 19, which also features Brian d'Arcy James, Idina Menzel and Julia Murney, is larger than the Public's 15. And rather than use Eiliran/Murphy Ltd., the theater club's usual agency, to design the ads for the musical, the producers have

Such competition over Queenie, the blonde of vaudeville!

try's new hip ad agency, which did the "Rent" posters that drew so much attention.

"I suppose it's an advantage to be first, but it's even more of an advantage to be good," said Rocco Landesman, president of Jujamcyn Theaters which owns the Virginia Theater, where the Public's production will be. "It'll be fun to see how it all evolves."

Be it a car or a theatrical production, selling a product bearing the same name as another on the market presents a costly challenge, and possibly a catastrophe.

"It's going to be about the ad images and the stars," said Randall L. Wreghitt, a Broadway producer who runs a company called Promarketing. "There is a contest there of sorts that goes not only for the shows themselves but how each show is presented to the public."

Ms. Williams went so far as to

necessary if both shows end up on Broadway. "Maybe we'll have to call ours, 'George Wolfe's 'Wild Party,'" she said.

Mr. Wolfe said it was distracting — even destructive — to focus on anything other than creating the musical, which starts rehearsals on Tuesday.

"As a producer, you have to be aware of the landscape," Mr. Wolfe said. "But that really can't inform the work that you do." Creating a musical, he added, is hard enough without looking over your shoulder.

Mr. Wolfe and others involved in the two shows repeatedly emphasized that with distinct creative teams, the projects might well turn out to have nothing in common except the source. Mr. Wolfe said that it would be like comparing "Romanoff and Juliet" and "West Side Story," two entirely different contemporary works inspired by "Romeo and Juliet" that appeared on Broadway in the same 1956-57 season.

Indeed, those who so far seem least affected by the existence of two productions are the creative people involved. "We don't think about it too much, frankly," said Gabriel Barre, who is directing the Manhattan Theater Club version.

Mr. Patinkin, who is starring in the Public's production, said: "I'm fascinated by it. I'd love to see the other one."

Each composer said he had been far too consumed by writing his "Wild Party" to worry about the other.

Both young composers — Mr. Lippa is 35, Mr. LaChiusa, 37 — describe encountering the poem in their own personal ways, and being drawn in by those first compelling lines: "Queenie was a blonde, and her age stood still/And she danced twice a day in vaudeville."

Mr. Lippa said he had come upon the poem, which had been reissued in 1994 with illustrations by Art Spiegelman, while browsing through the poetry section at a Barnes & Noble. In January 1996 he started writing. In the past Mr. Lippa had only written the music for pieces like "John and Jen" at the Lamb's Theater in 1995 and last season's "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown."

Lynne Meadow, artistic director of Manhattan Theater Club, said she was not discouraged by the other production. "The fact that someone else was drawn to it certainly as a

she said. "But that did interest or affect our Mr. LaChiusa and I worked together on tv at the Public, "The Prince," for which I wrote incidental music. "Lady Suite," three musicals about first ladies. We offered the composer a paid artist's residency and commissioned something for the Public. LaChiusa said he turned a poem. A friend had brought me a version to his he had stored it away he might return to.

"I read through it and is right now, what I said Mr. LaChiusa, with "Marie Christine," and the Vivian Beaumont.

Why bring "The straight to Broadway said that his theater commodate a product that "The Wild Party" Nevertheless, the music riving at the Virginia Broadway seems to be from riskier new work more sure-fire revivals.

Moreover, Mr. LaChiusa "Christine" received when it opened last me said that bucking the theater producing is you're part of trend, it," he said.

Mr. Wolfe said he n postponing or dropping "To not go ahead with he said. "Because it's ready to be born."

And much as the p theater insiders have chops over the prosp Party" showdown, a New York theater work for its Schadenfreude behind each production point to harbor little reason may be that originated in the world of institutional

Even Mr. Berling, the highs of producing recent hit revival "K and the lows of produ the 1997 bomb "Steel normally the first to ducing on Broadway a profit, seemed stram view about the whole view them as a compl