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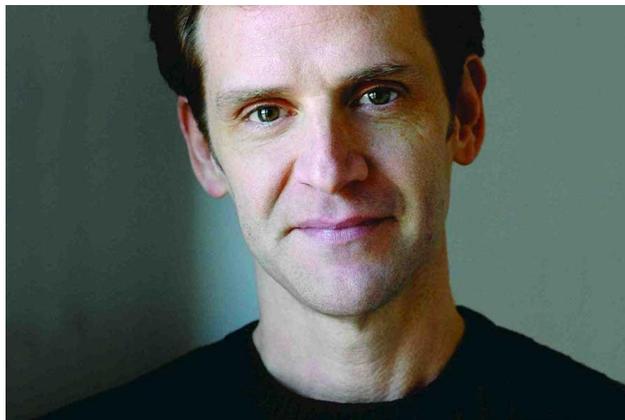
MUSIC

Stage, screen stars to honor Hammerstein in benefit concert

Larry Nichols

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Stage and screen icon Shirley Jones and a number of Broadway stars will converge upon New Hope for the third Oscar Hammerstein Festival's benefit concert, "Hammerstein in Hollywood," April 22 at Bucks County Playhouse.

Named in honor of the master songwriter and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, whose many accomplishments included mentoring a young Stephen Sondheim at Hammerstein's Highland Farm in Bucks County, the festival is a two-day event featuring special events all devoted to musical theater. The benefit concert will feature Ashley Brown ("Mary Poppins"), Max von Essen ("An American in Paris"), Malcolm Gets ("A New Brain") and Carmen Cusack ("Bright Star") performing alongside Bucks County Playhouse Hall of Fame honoree Jones.

The Tony Award-nominated Gets said that, even though he has met Jones before, the idea of sharing the stage with the legendary performer makes him a bit nervous.

"It is [intimidating] in terms of my respect for her," Gets said. "But as fate would have it, I have actually had dinner with Shirley because one of her sons, Patrick Cassidy, and I did a play together in 1992, right when we came out of school in Hartford, Conn. I got to be good friends with Patrick."

He and Jones even shared a singing teacher in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s.

"I've had dinner with Shirley at one point. I respect her so much," Gets said, noting, however, that "it's always nerve-wracking to sing in front of people who are your heroes. She is a wonderful, wonderful lady and very down to earth. And she has some great stories too, as you can imagine."

At presstime, Gets and the other performers were still deciding which songs from Hammerstein's extensive catalog of classics they would perform.

"Right now I'm either going to sing 'The Last Time I Saw Paris' — which he wrote with Jerome Kern, and was one of two songs they won the Academy Award for — or my other thought was to do a medley of songs that were written for the Broadway stage but were then cut from the Broadway shows and later used in movies," he said.

Gets said he hopes the festival and the performance will be enjoyable for longtime fans of Hammerstein.

But, he noted, the experience can also be eye-opening for those who enjoy the songs and shows he helped to create, but who might not be familiar with the breadth of Hammerstein's career.

"I would love it if we had a healthy balance [of older and newer fans] because Bucks County was Hammerstein's home," he said. "He had a famous house in Doylestown, which they are turning into a museum. I'm sure there are a number of die-hard fans plus people coming from New York who are Hammerstein fans. If they can get new fans to the theater, that would be great. Even young people know 'The Sound of Music.' I think a lot of people know more Hammerstein than they think they do because that movie has become a part of world culture."

The Oscar Hammerstein Festival presents "Hammerstein in Hollywood" 8 p.m. April 22 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope. For more information or tickets, call 215-862-2121 or visit <http://bcptheater.org>.