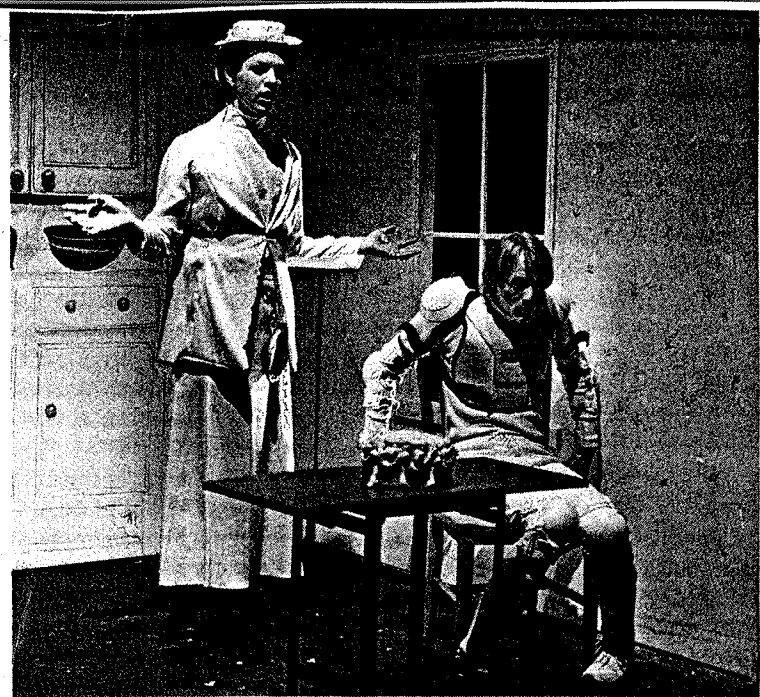




ROBERT C. RAGSDALE/SH ASSOC.



GREG MILLER

Strich and McMartin in *Show Boat*, Jeannie Zusy and John Moran in *Mathew* from *Reconstruction to deconstruction*

# Floating Operas

By Michael Feingold

### Show Boat

By Kern and Hammerstein  
Gershwin Theatre  
51st Street & Broadway  
586-6510

### Mathew in the School of Life: Part 1: Lamb of God

By John Moran  
The Kitchen  
512 West 19th Street  
255-6793

A vast, bulky watershed in our musical theater's history, *Show Boat* (1927) straddles its midpoint, 62 years after *The Black Crook* (1866), the first American musical, and 67 years before John Moran's new "opera" in progress, *Mathew in the School of Life*. Those who think the musical has evolved into a serious dramatic form, an American vernacular equivalent of opera, can find plenty of evidence in this sequence. The unrevivable *Black Crook* was a saggy Gothic melodrama into which a French ballet troupe had been shoved out of pure commercial expediency. *Show Boat*, based on Edna Ferber's novel, is an elaborate variant on the romantic operetta tradition, touched with realism. *Mathew* is pure electronics, a sci-fi story mimed and lip-synched to a taped assembly of digital samplings, its only human aspect the cast's tiny hesitations as they wheel through Bob McGrath's rigidly choreographed staging.

Still, the three works have much in common. The favored mode of melodrama may have changed over the decades, but melodrama mixed with spectacle is what all three are. The form may be evolving toward a greater coherence—believers in the serious musical use the word "integration"—but all three offer interruptive diversissements, and to some extent these diversions, not the story, are the main reason for their existence. In a

sense, the movement towards a "serious," "integrated" musical has always been futile: Americans prefer mindless entertainment, into which the form tends to lapse back, never quite making it up the dramatic hill to become opera. At best, the drive toward seriousness is half of a dialectic, locked in permanent aesthetic struggle with the drive toward inconsequentiality and pure diversion. At worst, ironically, the push to be serious often has the opposite effect, making a work look portentously kitschy instead of elevating it, entombing the somber side of a work while giving its diversions an air of desperation.

*Show Boat* is the classic instance of the musical's divided soul. For Florenz Ziegfeld, who produced it in 1927, it was a lavish spectacle, its love duets giving way to low comedy scenes, specialty dances, and parades, all backed by ornate scenery. For the audience, it was and remains primarily a banquet of Kern's lushly tuneful music, in which a rather scrawny love story can be vaguely made out against the bewildering whirl of passing eras and subplots. For Hammerstein, handed the impossible task of reconciling Ziegfeld's aims to Kern's and his own, it was a chance to put drama into the musical—at which point *Show Boat* runs aground on the shallows of Ferber's novel, because its story is only dramatic to the extent that platitudes about how time changes us all are dramatic.

Magnolia Hawks, the show boat captain's beautiful daughter, loves and marries the riverboat gambler Gaylord Ravenal. When his debts overwhelm him, he abandons her and their daughter, but Magnolia struggles on, becoming a Broadway star and seeing her daughter become one in turn. As often in Ferber, she gets a boost from a self-sacrificing woman colleague, the troupe's star, Julie, who is forced off the boat in Natchez

when a rejected lover spitefully reveals her mixed racial heritage; later, in a Chicago cabaret, Julie spoils her own big chance so Magnolia can get the job. Knowing his audience, Hammerstein omitted Julie's end as a forlorn streetwalker; for a final curtain, he contrived a bittersweet reunion for the now elderly Magnolia and Ravenal.

Though trespassing on the serious, this tale is mainly a repackaging for the musical theater of varieties of corn already familiar from other forms of pop entertainment. The plucky-gal-on-her-own story had been novelists' stock property for decades; the shock revelation of mixed blood dates from Boucicault's *Octoroon* (1859). A cigar-smoking Algonquinque who wrote comedies with George S. Kaufman in between novels, Ferber ingeniously used the kitschy materials to echo and comment on her story: The melodrama of Julie's expulsion is like a nasty mirror image of the one being rehearsed on the boat at the time; Ravenal's failure as a breadwinner offstage is contrasted to his success as the boat's romantic lead—he's only a poseur in real life.

Some of these intriguing implications found their way, haltingly, into Hammerstein's thick, complex script. But there was so much else he had to make room for: a bridal chorus, two solos for the blackface vaudeville performer Tess Gardella, Little Egypt's belly dance at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Ingeniously, Hammerstein tried using these sidetracks to tell the story: The Exposition, where "Why Do I Love You?" was sung, became the emblem of Gaylord and Magnolia's brief marital bliss; Gardella's second solo, "Hey, Feller," both covered a scene change and signaled the time jump to the 1920s.

Neither device, however, is so used in Harold Prince's new production, which seems to take the view that Hammerstein and Kern

are best saluted by a wholesale revision of their work. In fairness to Prince, he had precedents from the authors themselves, who rewrote and reshaped the piece at least four times, adding with each rewrite more of the songs that make *Show Boat* the irresistible audience pleaser it is. Prince has restored, intact, the lengthy, somber choral number "Mis'ry's Comin' Round" (cut pre-Broadway in 1927 to save time), and has added "I Have the Room Above Her" from the 1936 film. Against this, he's cut two songs, shredded one or two ensembles, and, unwisely, given "Why Do I Love You?" to Parthy, Magnolia's astringent mother, the only principal for whom the authors never wrote a song. Having cast a musical star (Elaine Strich) in the role, Prince may have felt obliged to do this, but the song is as wrong for Strich as it is for the role.

There has also been some prissy fiddling with lyrics. *Show Boat*'s notorious opening line—"Niggers all work on the Mississippi"—has understandably been changed to the usual "Colored folks work," but deleting the second verse of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," presumably because it describes a black man as shiftless and gin-drinking, was surely excessive. Ironically, it spoils the character of Joe, who, without his indolence, is merely a ponderous oracular voice. But then, Prince seems to see *Show Boat* as some kind of deep pronouncement on American life; his program note talks about the "sweep and historical punch" of the work. He replaces the Chicago fair and "Hey, Feller" with montages of passing time; far from making the show more serious, this only provides an excuse for more of Susan Stroman's lively dance steps and Florence Klotz's classy parades of period fashions.

There is so much fun, romance, and melody in *Show Boat* that Prince's earnestness can't spoil it all, even with help from Richard

Pilbrow's stark lighting and Eugene Lee's drab, unwieldy sets, backed by blown-up period photos that make the levee look like a museum diorama. When Joel Blum (Frank) is doing backflips, when Lonette McKee (Julie) or Mark Jacoby (Ravenal) is singing, *Show Boat* is heaven; that would also apply to Rebecca Luker (Magnolia) if she breathed steadily enough to sustain Kern's arching

## Theater

phrases. Both Gretha Boston (Queenie) and Michel Bell (Joe) have big, rich voices, but black people, for Prince, have to carry the moral meaning of *Show Boat*, so Boston plays with tight-lipped grimness, while Bell grows in bombast with every reprise of "Ol' Man River." Strich handles her easy task reliably, but John McMartin's Cap'n Andy, wheezing and swaybacked, must be the weirdest ever. Still, it's impossible not to be moved by *Show Boat*, when Kern and Hammerstein's gorgeous songs are rolling out one after the other. If only Prince had taken its cornball blockiness at face value, and stopped fretting about its deeper meanings, the spectacle and romance that are its essence might have been set free. But at least it doesn't have ballets of tortured political prisoners, like his last Broadway venture.

*Mathew in the School of Life* virtually is such a ballet, but its story and style make the notion almost fetching. Allegedly showing the education of an android on some nameless industrial planet, it tracks its hero (played by the author-composer) from his birth on the lab table through what looks like a child's first day of school, encountering such wonders as  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 112

## FEINGOLD

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 109

traffic lights, shopping malls, and mommy's impatience. These of course aren't things an android, already programmed, has to learn; the piece is a puckish deadpan metaphor for the alienation of a contemporary child in our industrialized world, given a darker hue by the hint (all we get in Part 1) that mechanized Mathew is a "journeyman"—a prefab Christ built to be sacrificed for our sins.

Moran's audio assemblage and McGrath's spacious, lucidly calibrated staging mesh like cogs in a Rube Goldberg contraption to tell this story. No single sound or event is new, but the playful spirit in which the old expressionist routines are laid out gives even the darkest moments a fresh, breezy feeling. It's abetted by Laurie Olinder's production design (her credit reads "art direction"), which is bright in two senses, both astute and colorful. She cunningly combines two or three simple elements to create an impression of a vast technological universe; Elizabeth Evers's costumes and Howard Thies's lighting play inventively along. Neither a musical nor an opera, since it has no singing, dancing, or drama in the strict sense of the word, *Mathew* is both a retread of the old forms, with its melodramatic incursions into nightmare and fantasy, and a minimalist clean slate, preparing the way for the new, whatever that may be. Tapera or technopera, you might call it. If it lacks the emotional expressiveness of *Show Boat*, at least it's floating free of the pretensions that make that once gorgeous vessel seem a leaky old hulk. ■