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Corey Cott and Laura Osnes star in *Bandstand*. Photo © Jeremy Daniel.

It Might As Well Be Swing

The new musical Bandstand brings the sound of 1940's swing music to the Broadway stage this month. *Jersey Jazz's* Sanford Josephson has a preview of the show (p. 26) which had its critically acclaimed first run at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Short Hills, NJ last fall.

Bandstand Brings Original 1940s Swing Era Music to Broadway

By Sanford Josephson

This month, Broadway will be filled with the swing music of the 1940s, but none of it will be music that you've heard before. The musical, *Bandstand*, is scheduled to open April 26 at the Bernard F. Jacobs Theatre. It's the story of six World War II veterans and a war widow in Cleveland who enter a national radio contest in 1945, hoping to be selected as America's next big swing band.

The original music and lyrics were written by Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor, and the show will be directed and choreographed by Andy Blankenbuehler, who won Tony Awards for *Hamilton* and *In The Heights*.

Oberacker acknowledges that he's not a jazz guy but someone who is fascinated by and steeped in the traditions of the movie musical. While conductor of Cirque Du Soleil's KA show at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Oberacker spent 18 months, in his spare time, working on the show's concept. It received a preview (as *The Bandstand*) last spring at Millburn's Paper Mill Playhouse.

The play is a little bit of a show within a show. There are moments, Oberacker says, when the characters just burst into song. And, there are other moments when the music is directly related to the efforts of the characters to get the band in shape for the contest. The six instrumental members of the band are actors who also play musical instruments, plus there will be a pit orchestra of 13 veteran musicians. Some of the actors, such as trumpeter Joey Pero and saxophonist James Nathan Hopkins are genuine jazz musicians (Pero went to Juilliard; Hopkins to the Berklee School of Music). The others are actors and singers, who have had some experience playing a musical instrument.

The big question from the beginning, Oberacker says, was, "Could we actually cast people who were good actors and singers and could



Bandstand cast members Geoff Packard, Joey Pero, James Nathan Hopkins, Laura Osnes, Corey Cott and Brandon James Ellis shown at a television commercial shoot for the new musical. Now in previews, the show opens on April 26 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater. Photo © Jeremy Daniel.

really play? Casting took a long time, but we were able to do it. Joey had been on stage in high school. He's not having to work at all on his trumpet chops, but he has to work on his singing and acting. Others are predominantly actors and singers who played instruments in high school. So, they have to work on their musicianship."

Co-orchestrator Greg Anthony Rassen points out that *Bandstand*, is the type of show, "that's never been

done before. It's essentially two bands. Often they play together, but sometimes the band onstage will just play, completely accompanying themselves. If the drama becomes heightened, then the pit orchestra comes on and supports them. Then, you have a 19-piece big band. Usually, the last thing you do in a show is orchestrate. With this show, you couldn't do that; you had to orchestrate first."

Oberacker likens the entrance of the pit orchestra to "the world of the movie musical taking over. Like in a film, there's a transition of time, the stage is spinning. The pit orchestra provides that moment. That's when the magic of the show happens. I think Greg has done an outstanding job of orchestrating that."

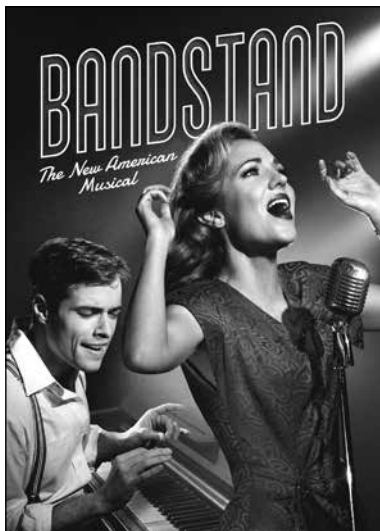
In composing the music, Oberacker had to walk a fine line between being original and sounding like music that would have really been played in the '40s.

"I listened to what were the top 10 hits of 1945," he says. "I listened for what the trends were in chord changes, melodies of the time, rhythms. I would have to say there were three predominant influences: Gershwin, early Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin."

Rassen believes the band in the show most closely resembles groups led by Woody Herman. "The first song that the band plays pays

homage to their big hit, 'Caledonia' with the band members shouting back to each other."

The leads in the show are Laura Osnes, the war widow, who was nominated for a Tony Award for *Cinderella*; and Corey Cott, the piano-playing leader of the six-piece band. He previously appeared on Broadway in *Gigi*. The other three band members are: Joe Carroll, drums (*Cinderella*); Brandon James Ellis, bass (*Once*); and Geoff Packard, trombone (*Matilda*). A list of the pit orchestra musicians was not available at presstime.



Jones described the melodies as "lush and jazzy, fitting the '40s like a glove." AmNewYork's Matt Windman singled out "The explosive 11 o'clock number, where the characters openly address their emotional wounds in the midst of a hot jazz number being broadcast live..." The "11 o'clock number," Oberacker says, is a song called "Welcome Home." "It starts as a poem written by the leading lady that the leading man sets to music, an

emotionally raw and honest tribute to the troops and what they've dealt with since returning from the war."

Since the language is so honest and raw, it can't be sung on air and is rewritten and

transformed into a simple love song for the live radio broadcast. What actually happens at the broadcast, Oberacker says, is "an incredibly emotionally charged moment and involves the audience in the songwriting experience."

Oberacker's favorite movie musical moment is Judy Garland's performance, while rehearsing with her band, of the Harold Arlen/Ira Gershwin standard, "The Man That Got Away" in *A Star is Born*. In *Bandstand*, there is a derivative scene when Laura Osnes rehearses a song called "Love Will Come and Find Me Again." "Like in *A Star is Born*," Oberacker says, "I wanted to be able to settle for a moment and just watch a singer and her band and how she interacts with her bandleader. I wanted to write a song that could have been in the Great American Songbook. The way it works in the show, I'm hoping people will say, 'I should know that song, it feels like a comfortable chair.' It's like building a set for a period movie." J

New Princeton U. Jazz Director Springs Into Action

Princeton University's Department of Music has appointed esteemed saxophonist and composer Rudresh Mahanthappa to the post of Director of Jazz. He began his appointment as the Anthony H. P. Lee '79 Senior Lecturer in Jazz Studies at the start of the fall term, succeeding Program in Jazz Studies founder Dr. Anthony D. J. Branker.

Mahanthappa comes to Princeton bearing not only a celebrated background in jazz performance, but also a unique voice intent on transcending cultural divides by hybridizing progressive jazz and non-Western musical traditions.

Program in Musical Performance Director Michael Pratt celebrates him "as nothing less than an already internationally acclaimed artist. His grounding in traditional jazz language and style is deep, and he also has proven himself to be an important explorer. He has taken new looks at past masters, and his work in incorporating world musics (such as that of the South Indian Carnatic classical tradition) into contemporary jazz has created a real 'buzz' in world jazz circles."

Commenting to *Jersey Jazz* on his brief tenure as Director



Rudresh Mahanthappa is the new director of Princeton University's jazz studies program. Photo by Jimmy Katz.

Mahanthappa quipped, "So far so, so good," and touted plans for a busy spring of "exciting stuff."

"Jazz at Princeton University has a very exciting spring season that embraces this music in its many styles and forms," says Mahanthappa. "Some of the top jazz artists of our day will be performing and working with our students. From saxophonist Walter Smith III performing with our top small jazz group to esteemed composer and alto saxophonist Steve Lehman's global hip-hop project *Sélébéyone* to a newly commissioned work by the amazing pianist Billy Childs, this will truly be a season to remember."

You can find full details for all six Princeton University Department of Jazz Studies events at www.princeton.edu/music/events/, but the **Jazz Vocal Collective I and II with special guest Darmon Meader** is probably of particular interest for *Jersey Jazz* readers. Meader is the highly respected vocalist, arranger and saxophonist who has achieved international recognition as the founder, musical director, chief arranger, composer, producer, saxophonist and vocalist with New York Voices. The event is at 7:30 PM on April 27 at the Taplin Auditorium in Fine Hall and is free and open to the public. J