

THE MAESTRO IN BLUEJEANS

BY JAN BRESLAUER - LOS ANGELES TIMES - SEPT. 21, 1997

Composer Michael Roth sits at a makeshift wooden table set on top of a row of seats near the back of a dark and nearly empty theater. A maestro in casual attire, he stares at a computer screen whose graphs and bars somehow correlate to the lush yet plaintive strains of cello that roll forth, on his command, to fill the house. As a scene change is rehearsed with the cast, a scrim bearing a photomural of 1912 London descends. The cello music increases and is joined by a more tonal counterpoint of clarinet, the two lines of sound building together, moving the play forward even as an upcoming street scene takes shape onstage.

These are just a few moments out of the current South Coast Repertory production of "Pygmalion," yet Roth attends to the detail as if each transition were a concerto, electronically orchestrating and conducting his score to complement the drama onstage. Composing for the theater is, after all, a collaborative art. "The best [projects] are the ones where I can create a musical atmosphere that is intrinsic and important to the piece, in a really interesting relationship with all the other artists," explains the soft-spoken yet outgoing San Diego-based musician. "[The music] should take you all the way through and satisfy you, not only emotionally but intellectually."

Roth should know. He's been a key fixture on the Southland theater scene for more than a decade, and any regular audience member has almost certainly heard his compositions. Resident composer at the La Jolla Playhouse since its 1983 revival, he's also written original music and designed sound for many plays at SCR, the Old Globe and the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco as well as other theaters across the country, averaging more than a dozen shows a year.

Already this season, Roth has scored plays at La Jolla and SCR. The premiere of Roth and Mac Wellman's kids' musical "tigertigertiger" is playing at Theatre of the First Amendment in Vienna, Va., and Roth is working on a musical adaptation of Aristophanes' "The Birds" for SCR, among other projects. The variety is just one indication of Roth's versatility. "A lot of musicians are not particularly knowledgeable about the theater, but Michael is," says playwright Wellman, who has collaborated with Roth on various ventures since they met in the late 1970s. "He's an anomaly: a Viennese intellectual transplanted to sunny La Jolla. He also has a wonderful populist touch. He's a very intelligent colleague and a wonderful collaborator."

And there's more to this one-man band of theatrical musicality than meets the theatergoer's ear. This month, Roth is releasing his first CD, a contemporary opera called "Their Thought and Back Again." The work is a personal landmark for the artist. "When you're around 40, you need to produce a piece that you can say is your first mature piece, that sort of sums up everything you've been doing," says Roth, who is 43. "The composers I most admire did that."

"Their Thought and Back Again," which was commissioned by and originally performed with Malashock Dance and Co. at the Old Globe in 1994, is a sung-through dramatic work as opposed to a book musical. Yet it's hardly a conventional opera or musical. A composition for two singers, six dancers, string quartet and piano, "Their Thought and Back Again" features a collage of found text lyrics, also by Roth. The story, to the extent that there is one, is about two women who journey to a new place and stay there.

Although it's difficult to place it in any single genre, "Their Thought and Back Again" has elements in common with such diverse works as Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's "Kleine Mahagonny" and "Die sieben Todsunden"; Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts"; Elliott Carter's Third String Quartet;

and even Leonard Bernstein's "Wonderful Town." Calling a 1996 performance of Roth's work "a delicate little masterpiece," San Diego Reader classical music critic Jonathan Saville wrote: "The unalloyed glory of 'Their Thought and Back Again' was Roth's ravishing score, a melodious, inventive, suavely orchestrated and intriguing experiment in a 'crossover' style, which had the dignity and complexity of serious music along with the idiomatic accessibility of various types of pop."

Eclecticism is indeed one of Roth's musical calling cards. "He's a classically trained musician, and he understands rock 'n roll," says composer Randy Newman, whose musical "Faust" Roth orchestrated at the La Jolla Playhouse in 1995 and at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago this year. "It's rarer than you think for people to be able to do both. "He has an open mind about music, and I admire that about him," Newman continues. "Some of the greatest music has a sense of play to it, and his has that quality. He writes well for voices and understands them. He can write a tune, too, which is rare."

That open mind is the result, perhaps, of a lifelong affinity for a wide variety of music, from the Beatles to Beethoven and back again. Born on Long Island, Roth studied composition with noted composer William Bolcom at the University of Michigan. During those years, Roth also discovered his love of writing for the theater. "I sort of fell into it," he recalls. "I did maybe 20 plays as an undergrad, because nobody else was doing it."

After school, Roth moved to New York, where he wrote music, orchestrated and did sound direction for productions at a variety of small theaters. It was in this milieu that Roth met some of his most important professional contacts, including Wellman and Newman. While orchestrating a 1981 staging of a cabaret of Newman songs called "Maybe I'm Doing It Wrong," Roth met director Des McAnuff, who was soon to be appointed artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse (where he remounted the Newman piece).

Roth was music director for McAnuff's 1982 New York Shakespeare Festival staging of "The Death of Von Richtofen," and McAnuff ended up taking Roth with him to La Jolla in 1983. A musician himself, McAnuff was more attuned to the use of music in theater than were most directors at the time. "There was no such thing as sound design back then in the sense that there is now," Roth says. "When I first came to La Jolla with Des, it was just beginning to get thought of as a strong design element, to be budgeted and equipped well.

"Now it's pretty formalized," Roth continues. "With more and more directors, having a sound designer, or having a composer as a sound designer . . . is almost [certain]. You're as serious a collaborator as any other designer." Roth met his wife, scenic designer and artist Jill Moon, at McAnuff's 1984 wedding to actress Susan Berman. And with the exception of a few late 1980s years spent in residence in Ithaca, N.Y.--when Moon was teaching at Cornell-- the couple have lived in San Diego since the mid-1980s.

From this seemingly idyllic base, Roth maintains a heavy travel schedule required by his mix of theater jobs and film scoring assignments yet also finds time to pursue his chamber music. The difficulty in forging such a varied career path is, of course, the culture's tendency to label and pigeonhole artists. "Usually you have to make a choice to be a pop composer or you end up on a campus writing music that nobody cares about," Wellman says. "But Michael is struggling mightily against that. He's writing popular music that has a kind of density and thoughtfulness to it."

One thing that keeps Roth moving is his desire to keep expanding his palette. "That's what a composer needs to do," he says. "You have to keep renewing your vocabulary and figuring out what else you're interested in writing."

* "Their Thought and Back Again" is available in L.A. exclusively at Borders, 1360 Westwood Blvd., Westwood, or via e-mail at Rothmusik@aol.com