

FRIDAY, JULY 13, 2007

Stripped Down  
But Still Hatted,  
**That Cat**  
Is Back  
In Town

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON

*"Oh-oh!" Sally said.  
"Don't you talk to that cat.  
That cat is a bad one,  
That Cat in the Hat.  
He plays lots of bad tricks.  
Don't you let him come  
near.  
You know what he did  
The last time he was  
here."*

Or don't you recall? Well, then, let's refresh: The last time "Seussical: The Musical" was in New York, in the 2000-1 season, it closed in less than six months, having lost more than \$10 million, and went into the history books as one of Broadway's biggest disappointments.

When something like this fails — a hotly anticipated musical based on the works of a beloved children's author, written by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, who were still glowing from their "Ragtime" accolades, and involving some of the biggest names in the industry — it is perhaps best forgotten.

But next week the Cat in the Hat comes back, albeit a little more quietly. This production, under the aegis of Theatre-works USA, the 46-year-old nonprofit children's

theater company, is playing off Broadway at the Lucille Lortel, for a limited run, starting Monday and ending on Aug. 17. It will be quite a bit shorter than the two-and-a-half-hour original. And admission will be free.

A few things have happened while the Cat's been away. "Seussical" went on to have a successful life on tour, playing more than a year on the road. Almost immediately after the show was licensed, it became the most popular title in the catalog for Music Theater International. It's still in the Top Three; at the moment there are productions in Goshen, Ind.; Alpharetta, Ga.; Regina, Saskatchewan; and Dubai, among many other places.

Unlike most licensed shows, "Seussical" has four different versions being staged by theaters around the country: a full-length production similar to the one that went on tour, a one-hour production intended to be performed by children, a 30-minute production intended



Michael Falco for The New York Times  
Shorey Walker will play the Cat in the Hat in the new "Seussical."

for really young children and a 70-minute, streamlined production for all ages. It's that last version that will be the first "Seussical" to be seen in New York since the Broadway show closed.

"You think, 'Well, it's New York, it's been here, and that wasn't fun,'" said Ms. Ahrens, who along with Mr. Flaherty had to give special permission for the show to be produced in the city. "On the other hand, what do we have to lose?"

"It's in a totally different form," she added. "It's a new look at a show."

The odd thing, though, is that this production is not really that different from the

show the songwriters said they first set out to write. They both said that this shorter, slimmer, quieter "Seussical" is the show they had envisioned from the start.

When Marcia Milgrom Dodge, the director of the Theatreworks production, first began working on it in 2005, Ms. Ahrens sent her an e-mail message. "The only thing I will say is the most important thing," the message read. "Simplicity. Do it like a workshop. Don't glitz it up."

The line about the workshop may seem a little odd, but it makes sense, given "Seussical's" history. When the show — which has a plot

**The Cat in the Hat Is Back**

"Seussical: The Musical" was a two-and-a-half-hour critical and commercial disappointment on Broadway in 2000-1. Now a much shorter version of the Lynn Ahrens-Stephen Flaherty show is back in New York after popular runs around the country. And it's free.

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Michael Falco for The New York Times

Josh Walden, left, Michael Wartella and Amelia Morgan-Rothschild rehearsing the new version of "Seussical," which opens Monday.

cobbled together from a number of works by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel), including "Horton Hears a Who!," "McElligot's Pool" and "Yertle the Turtle" — was presented in a workshop in Toronto in 1999, featuring actors in street clothes and minimal props, the response from Broadway producers was rapturous: This was going to be the second coming of "The Lion King." Or better.

Things went downhill from there. Directors came and went; set designers came and went; costume designers came and went. Eventually Cats in the Hat would come and go too. (See O'Donnell, Rosie.) There were discussions on how to make a show based on children's books appeal to adult theatergoing audiences. (That the show was headed for a big Broadway production was certain from the beginning, when Garth Drabinsky, who headed the soon-to-be-bankrupt production company Livent, acquired the rights to the books and hired Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty to write the musical.)

The result was, well, cumbersome.

At the time some criticized the work itself, saying that it was too convoluted, too disorganized and not funny

enough. But just about all the critics agreed that the main problem was that it had been overproduced — too bright, too busy, too many bells and whistles.

Ben Brantley, in his review for The New York Times, said that "you may find you can hear a happy little show that might have been beneath all the layers of fat in this production."

After the bad reviews, a winter of scrambling ensued, followed by the inevitable closing. Broadway moved on.

But Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty said they knew even then that they were not finished with it. They tweaked the show considerably for the road and in 2004 were given a chance to take a much bigger stab at reworking. The Coterie Theater in Kansas City, Mo., asked for permission to develop a shortened version of "Seussical," one that would be aimed at younger audiences.

Ms. Ahrens and Mr. Flaherty began making large cuts and simplifying story lines. When they were finished, they discovered a "Seussical" that they hadn't seen since the workshop in 1999.

The Broadway show, Ms. Ahrens said, "digressed a little too much."

"It was complicated," she

added. "I thought it was fun and clever, but it was sort of working against itself."

That awkward attempt to appeal to all ages on Broadway was unnecessary in the revision. "I think the show wants to be for kids," Ms. Ahrens said. (An entire subplot of the Broadway show, based on Dr. Seuss's antiwar satire "The Butter Battle Book," was cut for the shortened version. That cut was mainly to make the plot clearer and easier to grasp for young audiences.)

Mr. Flaherty echoed Ms. Ahrens. "What we found is that the show actually plays better," he said.

In 2005 Barbara Pasterneck and Ken Arthur, the artistic and managing directors of Theatreworks, decided to take a production of the shortened version on tour. It wasn't the type of show that the theater had typically done; the preference had always been for smaller-scale original works.

With a cast of 12 and a \$250,000 price tag, even this slimmed-down version of "Seussical" was twice as large and twice as expensive as the usual Theatreworks production. But, Mr. Arthur said, it was part of Theatreworks' plan to produce larger-scale shows that appeal to broader

audiences.

Once she was brought on to the show, Ms. Dodge, who had seen "Seussical" on tour but not on Broadway, decided to frame the action as if it were being put on by children on a playground. Household objects were the props — turkey basters as icicles, an egg beater as a movie camera, a basketball in an inner tube as an egg in a nest — and costumes were of the hand-me-down variety.

There were benefits to this approach, including that it was much, much cheaper. But the songwriters loved it too, saying it had the scrappy charm that was lost after that Toronto workshop.

Ms. Dodge's version of "Seussical" first went on the road last September and was one of the three most popular touring shows for Theatreworks, earning back its money and playing to roughly 145,000 children across the country.

Accounts differ here, but at some point the idea was broached of bringing this version to New York to be part of Theatreworks' annual free summer theater program. If it was going to come to New York, Theatreworks was the company to make the case, since the theater had commissioned Ms. Ahrens and Mr.

Flaherty for their professional debut as a songwriting team, a production of "The Emperor's New Clothes" in the mid-1980s.

There were things to consider: critics, New Yorkers with sour memories. But a production in New York that the authors say was closer to their intent would also go a long way toward salvaging the show's local reputation. Mr. Flaherty and Ms. Ahrens both said granting permission was a no-brainer.

It would be wrong to say that "Seussical" would have been better off without Broadway, because without the original Broadway plans the show would probably never have been written. But, Mr. Flaherty said, sometimes shows take long detours to arrive where they're supposed to.

"Seussical" will begin performances Monday at 10:30 a.m. and run through Aug. 17 at the Lucille Lortel Theater, 121 Christopher Street, West Village. A limited number of free tickets will be distributed, first come first served, from the box office one hour before each performance; there is a limit of four tickets per person. Information: [twusa.org](http://twusa.org). (212) 332-0001.