

# PROGRAM NOTES BY JOSHUA S. RITTER

*La Cage aux Folles*

An unprecedented triumph of the Parisian theatre world, Jean Poiret's hilarious farce *La Cage aux Folles* premiered at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal on February 1, 1973. This wildly popular comedy ran for nearly 1,800 performances and was adapted into a 1978 film seen by more than five million people in France. It premiered in the US in 1979 and became the highest grossing foreign language film in US history at that time, with domestic box-office revenues exceeding \$20 million. It was also nominated for three Oscars, including best screenplay. The film spun off two additional sequels, *La Cage aux Folles II* in 1980 and *La Cage aux Folles: The Wedding* in 1985, as well as a separate 1996 American film adaptation of the play, *The Birdcage*. But, most importantly for musical theatre fans, a big, fabulous, splashy, old-fashioned musical adaptation of the play opened on Broadway at the Palace Theatre in 1983.

Yet, before the plumed and spangled "Cagelles" could kick their way on to the Great White Way, there were some challenges to overcome. For example, *La Cage aux Folles* the musical almost had a completely different creative team and title. In 1976, Hollywood Producer Allan Carr was itching to produce his first Broadway musical when he attended the play *La Cage aux Folles* in Paris. Encouraged by the appeal of the play, he decided to produce an Americanized musical adaptation to be set in New Orleans titled: *The Queen of Basin Street*. Carr hired Jay Presson Allen to write the book, Maury Yeston to compose the score, Mike Nichols to direct, and Tommy Tune to choreograph. A dispute led to members of the team dropping out, and the project seemed doomed. Despite this false start, Carr believed in the material and began anew. He negotiated a settlement with Yeston and replaced him with composer Jerry Herman. Next, they approached Harvey Fierstein, whose successful play *Torch Song Trilogy* was breaking new ground in the theatre, and invited him to pen his first Broadway libretto. Carr persuaded theatre veteran Arthur Laurents to direct once Herman and Fierstein were on board. The new creative team agreed to revert to the original setting in St. Tropez, France and use the title *La Cage aux Folles*.

*La Cage aux Folles* eventually became the standout hit of the Broadway season and the first long-running musical about a gay couple. Everyone was petrified on the night of the first out-of-town tryout. As Arthur Laurents recalled, "Eight o'clock. The Colonial Theatre, Boston. A lovely evening in early summer, and I am more frightened than I have ever been in my theatrical life...the exhausted performers are doubly frightened. Because no audience has ever seen this show. And how, how are these good Bostonians going to react to an American musical which begins with drag queens and ends with two male lovers walking off into a metaphorical sunset, arms around each other?" He goes on to describe the elation they felt when they realized that the show worked: "And then Gene sings, so simply, so truly; and when he finished,

the audience applauds as I have never heard an audience applaud a ballad before. I begin pounding Harvey who sits in front of me, saying over and over: "It works, it works!"

*La Cage aux Folles* played to standing-room only crowds and shattered box office records at Boston's Colonial Theatre. It opened for previews at the Palace Theatre on Broadway with advance ticket sales of over \$3.5 million and it was the first musical to charge a whopping \$47.50 for orchestra seats. *La Cage aux Folles*

went on to sweep the 1983-84 Tony Awards with six wins, including Best Musical. The original Broadway production ran for more than four years, playing 1,762 performances. *La Cage aux Folles* later made history by winning the Tony Award for Best Revival twice, first in 2004 and again in 2010. What's more, it is the musical that gave us such Herman gems as "The Best of Times," "Song on the Sand," and "I Am What I Am." The impact and broad appeal of *La Cage aux Folles* are self-evident; it is a hilarious, tuneful show that conveys the importance of love, family and acceptance.

Director Rob Ruggiero (Goodspeed's *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Carousel*, *Show Boat*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Camelot*, *Big River*, and *1776*) endeavors to delight audiences with a *La Cage aux Folles* that will be grounded in family and relationships without compromising the outrageous and amusing aspects of the show. Ruggiero intends to anchor the story of an untraditional family through realistic and believable casting choices. Regarding the technical aspects of the show, Ruggiero states, "Our set designer, Michael Schweikardt, has outdone himself with a set that is deliciously over the top, glamorous, and very pink!. It is not only beautiful, but skillfully re-invents itself with imaginative scenic gestures. Michael McDonald has designed an array of dazzling and spangled costumes to enhance this exotic world." Ruggiero is excited to share Jerry Herman's brilliant music and Harvey Fierstein's remarkable comic writing with Goodspeed audiences. We hope you enjoy this timeless musical that has been a source of strength, entertainment and inspiration for so many people.



The original Broadway cast of *La Cage*.