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## It's the premier place for premieres

BY CHRISTINE DOLEN

Once a rarity in South Florida theater, world premiere plays and musicals are (to quote Oscar Hammerstein II) bustin' out all over.

Right now, there are three never-before-seen shows in Miami-Dade and Broward: Jeanette Hopkins' *Bombshells! A Musical Explosion of Life, Love and Telling It All!* at Actors' Playhouse and Robert Caisley's *Kissing* at New Theatre, both in Coral Gables; and Mario Diament's *A Report on the Banality of Love* at the Promethean Theatre in Davie.

*Too Jewish?* creator and star Avi Hoffman debuts *Still Jewish After All These Years* this weekend at the New Vista Theatre in west Boca Raton, and the end of the month brings new plays at Manalapan's Florida Stage and Little Havana's Teatro en Miami Studio. At least a half-dozen more world premieres will hit South Florida stages between February and August.

Such bounty is not, of course, to suggest that South Florida rivals New York or Chicago as a breeding ground for new work. But as the simultaneous premieres of the diverse *Bombshells*, *Banality* and *Kissing* demonstrate, theater lovers with a passion for the new now have plenty of chances to be among the first audiences to weigh in on a piece. And South Florida theaters have the sort of shot at history New Theatre got when it commissioned Nilo Cruz to write what became the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anna in the Tropics*.

### RISK AND REWARD

Being the first company to stage a script carries risks as well as potential rewards. Both the title and playwright may be unfamiliar, so unless theatergoers get into the habit of seeing new work -- an experience Florida Stage's audiences have relished through many seasons -- they may be reluctant to take a chance on something unproven. Though many playwrights take their scripts through readings and workshops before getting a full production, first-time perfection can be maddeningly elusive. Musicals, which involve more collaborators, are even more difficult to get right the first time around.

*Bombshells'* Hopkins, at least, doesn't have to argue with a composer, lyricist or book writer: She did all three jobs in transforming the Miami *Bombshells'* book *Dish & Tell: Life, Love and Secrets* into a musical. Hopkins spent two years turning anecdotes about love, loss, health crises, careers and more into scenes and songs with hopes of creating a show that will be amusing, moving and empowering. But as with any musical, the piece has evolved.

"At first, the writer [Hopkins] was in the show," says David Arisco, the Actors' Playhouse artistic director who is staging *Bombshells*. "That confused it. Now, it's a beautiful story

about six women who had one friend in common, about their friendship and how they share secrets."

Raising the stakes for the actors -- Laura Turnbull as Sara, Patti Gardner as Mercedes, Margot Moreland as Tammi, Laura Hodos as Annie, Pilar Uribe as Lydia and Melissa Minyard as Pat -- is the fact that they're playing the high-powered Miami women who wrote *Dish & Tell*, women who weren't shy about sharing their opinions during the development of the show (and who will join the performers in a post-performance talk back Friday).

"If they protest," a smiling Hopkins says of the real Bombshells, "it's because they don't want people to see who they really are."

Working with *Canadian Idol* choreographer David Campbell, arranger Artie Butler and musical director David Nagy, Arisco and the cast have put the constantly changing show together in a little more than three weeks. Says a laughing Arisco: "Now I know why a world-premiere musical needs more time!"

The chance to be the first actor to play a powerfully written role helped induce Colin McPhillamy and Amy McKenna to say yes when Promethean Theatre producing artistic director Deborah L. Sherman asked them to be in Diament's *A Report on the Banality of Love*.

McPhillamy, a Broadway, London and regional theater veteran, was in a Beijing production of *King Lear* when Sherman reached him. After he read Diament's play about the love affair between German philosopher (and onetime Nazi Party member) Martin Heidegger and his Jewish former student Hannah Arendt, he remembers thinking, "This is a compelling story. I like the simplicity, the starkness of it."

And though he'll next appear at Minneapolis' large, prestigious Guthrie Theatre, McPhillamy had no qualms about returning to the tiny Promethean, where he previously appeared in *Blue/Orange*.

"You choose quality," he says.

Quality is why Sherman picked Diament's script and why Diament, who had intended to premiere it at a theater in Hungary, chose Promethean instead. The two knew each other from New Theatre, where Diament's most recent play *Blind Date* premiered before going on to productions in numerous countries.

"I sent it to Deborah, and she called me the next day and said, 'I love it. I'll do it,'" recalls the Argentina-born Diament, who writes his scripts in Spanish (his wife, Simone Zarmati Diament, translates). "The cast here is a dream cast."

"It's a risk to do new plays," Sherman says. "We don't know how it's going to turn out. People don't know the title, don't know the work. But we're proud to provide Mario with another opportunity to speak and be heard."

### THIRD IN ROW

At New Theatre, Caisley's *Kissing* is the third new play in a row for artistic director Ricky J. Martinez. Like Florida Stage, the company is a member of the National New Play Network, whose member theaters share scripts and create more production opportunities for playwrights.

Caisley, who teaches at the University of Idaho, came to Martinez's attention after another of his plays was done at Miami's Lavender Footlights Festival. Though this is the first production of *Kissing* -- a comedy about an older married man, the co-worker with whom he's having an affair, the man's wife and the co-worker's new boyfriend -- Caisley has taken the script through readings in Alaska and Arizona and is a fan of the developmental process.

"I find that invaluable. I don't labor under the misapprehension that I *know* what my play is about," he says. "Playwrights who are sure and set regarding their script can deprive themselves of riches that might be in the play, riches they hadn't anticipated."

Though playwrights are usually around during the rehearsals for a world premiere, Martinez mostly consulted with Caisley (who did come to South Florida for opening weekend) by phone, working on the piece with actors Jessa Thomas, Larry Buzzeo, Barbara Sloan and Kyle A. Thomas.

Martinez, drawn to Caisley's "clean" script, says he didn't see the need for much rewriting, which *can* happen a great deal in the first production of a play. And now, as a director with plenty of experience staging new works, Martinez approaches the process differently.

"When I was younger, my productions were more directorial. Sometimes I got in the way of the playwright's vision," he says. "Now I try to sink into the playwright's rhythm and words. I try to get myself as director out of it, so that it looks seamless."