

Kiss and tell

Bailiwick's new musical sets the record straight that Alexander wasn't By **Kay Daly**

When Stephan deGhelder made his Broadway debut at age 19 in the chorus of *Hello, Dolly*, the moment was less than auspicious. "I was a replacement in the 'Dancing' number, and I waltzed out and stepped on Betty

conqueror, and ends up finding love with a mysterious stranger—a reincarnated Alexander?—who joins the cast. The result is a sometimes campy, sometimes touching romantic fantasy, set amid the colorful world of New York theater.



ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE Actor Graham Kurtz (left), deGhelder and Simmons musicalize the Great one.

Grable's foot," the former hooper says of his stage time with the show's leading diva. Grable wasn't mad, but she did have him replaced in the number. "She said the reason was I looked too much like her grandson," deGhelder recalls.

Given that early brush with a bona fide Broadway legend (not to mention an impressive, decades-long résumé as a director, writer and performer), it's perhaps not surprising that when deGhelder decided to dramatize the story of Alexander the Great, he set the tale as a backstage musical. The result is *A Kiss from Alexander*, which was given a workshop in October at Bailiwick Repertory and receives its world-premiere staging as part of the company's Pride Series.

In deGhelder's retelling, an Off-Broadway director struggles to produce a musical about the Greek

But according to deGhelder, the heart of the show isn't its *All About Eve* machinations. Instead, his *Alexander* is a love story. He notes that most retellings of Alexander's life, including the recent Oliver Stone epic starring Colin Farrell,

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gloss over a significant part of the story. "I couldn't believe the movie makers were skipping over his homosexuality," deGhelder says, referencing Alexander's love for his companion and second-in-command, Hephaestion. "It's actually one of the great stories of ancient history, so I thought I'd

write a show that deals with that."

Yet deGhelder had no idea how to approach the story until inspiration came from an unlikely source. "I remembered that back in 1947, Michael Todd had produced a musical on Broadway with Mae West as Catherine the Great. The title was *Catherine Was Great!* So I thought, 'Alexander Was Great!'—There's a great song title. So I wrote the song and started building a show."

Eager to see his creation on stage, deGhelder penned the script and lyrics, and began querying theaters all across the country—even though he didn't have a score yet. The querying process is usually quite long, deGhelder explains. "I thought, By the time I get an answer, I'm going to have the whole thing finished," he says. Much to his surprise, Bailiwick artistic director David Zak bit immediately and requested a sample of the score.

deGhelder turned to Brad Simmons, a young musician-performer he'd worked with in regional theater, to collaborate on the finished show. Simmons read the script and liked what he saw. "It was a fully realized show with carefully constructed lyrics. It was very evident what the style of the songs would be." Working quickly, Simmons met with deGhelder and hammered out nearly the entire score during an intensive four-day session.

But why Alexander? Simmons and deGhelder admit it was initially a canny marketing move. With the Oliver Stone film out in 2004 and rumors of another starring Leonardo DiCaprio in the works, the pair assumed the stage was set for an Alexander juggernaut. "We planned to ride on the coattails of all that success," Simmons says, as deGhelder quips, "We thought there'd be Alexander bobbleheads."

Still, deGhelder and Simmons see the failure of Stone's movie as offering them an opportunity. "It disappeared so quickly. Now we have the chance to start a whole new interest in putting Alexander onstage."

A Kiss from Alexander puckers up at the Bailiwick Monday 11.

Reviews



LINCOLN NARC Elizabeth Rich (right) disapproves of her friends who live off the Fullerton stop.

Dollhouse

By **Rebecca Gilman**. Dir. **Robert Falls**. With ensemble cast. **Goodman Theatre** (see Resident companies).

She changed the ending. Rebecca Gilman, our poetic stenographer of American gentrified privilege, has annulled a bit of feminist history with her adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In her 21st-century update, a Williams-Sonoma kitchen drama set in a tony Lincoln Park townhouse and inhabited by insufferably spoiled creatures, Gilman undoes a defining moment in Western theater. Seconds after Nora, a kept, childlike wife and mother, walks out on her emotionally abusive spouse and famously slams the door (the startling act of closure in Ibsen's version), she comes back inside and decides to stay put. This allusive move, more gimmick than commentary, doesn't just alter the fate of the characters. It washes out the soul of the play. It's a shame, because this means Falls's immaculately realized production is lavished on a text that spends more time and energy trying to justify its sedated, post-Hillary feminism and its contemporary analogs for an 1879 Nordic drawing room than it does simply telling the story of a sheltered woman's awakening.

Dollhouse will be embraced by the audiences it critiques, and by audiences in general—a spotlessly acted and gorgeously designed play is always good for business. To her credit, Gilman has written an ending that's probably as shocking to her theater patrons as Ibsen's was to his. But the switch only works presuming literate viewers will know the difference. So how does one recommend an adaptation of *A Doll's House* that feigns the courage to hold up a mirror to its audience, yet doesn't really have the nerve to slam a door in its face? —*Christopher Platt*

THEATER

Don't miss!	115
Touring shows	115
Resident companies	115
Seats for a song	115
Fringe & storefronts	118
Here today... gone tomorrow	119