

Respect for Sondheim lures Peggy Lee to stage

By ETHEL SIMMONS

In a telephone interview one recent morning, from her home in California, singer-composer-actress Peggy Lee answered questions about her upcoming month-long engagement at the Birmingham Theatre.

Q. STARRING IN 'SIDE BY SIDE BY SONDEHEIM,' OPENING FRIDAY AT THE BIRMINGHAM THEATRE WILL BE YOUR FIRST STAGE PRODUCTION. WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO DO THE SHOW?

A. I've had other invitations and offers, but I finally said, "Why not? It's my great respect for Sondheim."

Q. THIS PRODUCTION HAS BEEN CALLED AN ALL-NEW VERSION OF THE MULTI-AWARD-WINNING MUSICAL HIT. HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE ORIGINAL?

A. It's a reconstructed version. We are including a lot of music not in that first show, specifically sung by me. We're rewriting the text. I do the narration. We hope it's warm and intimate with the audience, telling them about the songs and anecdotes that have occurred in his life.

Also, Eileen LaGrange the musical director has arranged for two pianos, side by side. The show is produced by the Nederlanders and directed by Norman Twain.

We will be adding a bass. That's different, too. There may be possibly one more instrument.

My costumes are by Cara Robins, one of the new designers. She's awfully good. I'm thrilled about them. They're designed to enhance the set, or vice versa. They're very elegant, very glamorous.

The set is marvelously simple. It gives the impression of

sort of a floating stage. Sets and lights are by Clark Duncan and Richard Odle.

Q. DID YOU FIND REHEARSING A MUSICAL PRODUCTION FAR MORE DIFFICULT THAN PUTTING TOGETHER A CONCERT OR NIGHT CLUB APPEARANCE?

A. No. It isn't. I was told it would be. I have very disciplined rehearsals for my concerts and supper club things. I just find it very interesting. Another thing that intrigues me is, it's something different for my career.

Q. IT'S BEEN ANNOUNCED THAT SONDEHEIM SONGS YOU SING IN 'SIDE BY SIDE BY SONDEHEIM' ARE FROM THE SHOWS 'GYPSY,' 'SWEENEY TODD,' 'A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC,' 'COMPANY,' 'WEST SIDE STORY,' 'ANYONE CAN WHISTLE' AND 'A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM.' ARE THERE ANY CHANGES?

A. We've just added two more songs yesterday. I'll do "Ah, Paree," with a French accent, and "Buddy's Blues." They're both from "Follies."

Q. YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED A LIVING LEGEND. TO WHAT DO YOU ATTRIBUTE YOUR ABILITY TO STAY ON TOP AS A STAR?

A. It is loving the work, loving the music and being more than willing to keep polishing the talent you've been given, and keeping up with the trends as they go, and not forsaking the trends of the past.

Q. SEX SYMBOLS COME AND GO. YET YOU HAVE ALWAYS MAINTAINED A QUALITY OF SEX APPEAL. WHAT, TO YOU, ARE THE ELEMENTS OF SEX APPEAL?

A. I don't think of myself as a sex symbol. I think that

warmth, perhaps, in any woman is attractive to men.

Q. 'SIDE BY SIDE BY SONDEHEIM' IS HAVING ITS PRE-BROADWAY RUN AT THE BIRMINGHAM THEATRE. WHERE AND WHEN WILL IT OPEN ON BROADWAY?

A. I don't know yet. It will be at a Nederlander Theatre, I believe in October.

Q. BESIDES BEING A TOP VOCALIST, YOU ARE A COMPOSER OF LYRICS AND MUSIC. IS BEING A COMPOSER AS IMPORTANT TO YOU AS BEING A SINGER?

A. In the long run, perhaps so. I do like the expression of singing. There's something about singing that's healthy, expressing yourself and bringing out pent-up emotions. I imagine it vibrates the entire body.

Q. AMONG YOUR MANY SONG HITS, DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE?

A. Oddly enough, the ones that have been the best for me in terms of hits, I still do in concerts: "Is That All There Is?" "Fever" and "Why Don't You Do Right."

Q. WHEN YOU SELECT A SONG TO RECORD, HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT MAKING A CHOICE?

A. I have to believe in the lyrics. That's an interesting point about "Side by Side by Sondheim." No matter how wonderful the melody, if the lyric wouldn't be what I believe in, I couldn't sing it.

At first, going over the lyrics I found less of the happier songs. I respect his work. It's extremely truthful.

I have not had the pleasure of meeting him. I sense a deep sadness about the man. But some of his lyrics are funny.

I have heard he might come to Birmingham.

Q. JAZZ, BLUES, SWING, LATIN AND ROCK HAVE ALL BEEN INFLUENCES IN YOUR MUSICAL CAREER. WHAT TRENDS IN MUSIC DO YOU FORESEE?

A. Right now there seems to be a resurgence of interest in jazz and big bands, and continuation of soft rock and jazz. We're in a period of improvement from the earth-shaking influence of acid rock.



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— Peggy Lee

Theater goes into 2nd season of shows

The Birmingham Theatre Club's second season subscription series will offer four shows, including two pre-Broadway runs, a Tony-award-winning Broadway hit and an off-Broadway hit. "Side by Side by Sondheim" starring Peggy Lee opens at a preview Friday. The second season's official opening night set for Tuesday. The new version of the musical runs through July 20.

The Birmingham Theatre has booked "Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?" a comedy that has played more than a year in Chicago. An affectionate look at life in a Catholic school,

this show also is headed for Broadway in November.

The theater was negotiating to bring the long-running Broadway hit "The Elephant Man" as one of last season's four shows. Negotiations were unsuccessful but continue this season, with the powerful drama again listed as a possibility on the playbill.

THE OFF-BROADWAY SUCCESS "Table Settings," a play about an American family, is the fourth announced production. The comedy takes place around one of three table settings.

Box office hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday at the Birmingham Theatre, 357 S. Woodward near Maple; phone 644-3533 to reserve seats.

Harry Nederlander of Nederlander Theatrical Enterprises, which operates the Birmingham Theatre, said tickets for the new season average \$11 at night, \$10 for a matinee.

"That isn't bad for the legitimate theater," he said. "Most prices are up to about \$22.50. We think our prices in today's market are very moderate."

Most shows are booked centrally for the nation-wide network of Nederlander theaters, but all their theaters have

some input, Nederlander said.

THEIR CONCEPT is to offer "the best quality for the minimum you can afford to charge."

Asked why the Birmingham community isn't more heavily represented in the audience, he said, "We think it's a theater for the metropolitan Detroit area. People it draws will relate in proportion."

He agreed that many Detroit-area people aren't yet familiar with the Birmingham Theatre. "We're still trying to establish our identity and that takes time," Nederlander said.

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