

Thursday, December 11, 1980

Energy

Theater star jogs to keep performances lively

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Victor Garber, 31-year-old star of "They're Playing Our Song," opened the door of his Birmingham rental townhouse. He was wearing a red jogging suit and grey sweatsocks. No shoes.

Garber looked even more youthful than he does on stage at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit, where he and Marsha Skaggs are doing land office business in the Neil Simon musical.

Slightly unshaven, with wide brown eyes and a springy headful of brown curls, Garber projected an innocence and naturalness that is appealing. An appearance of innocence is one of the things that has helped him along in his career that began as a child performer in his hometown of London, Ontario.

In "They're Playing Our Song," Garber is cast as a somewhat uptight, yet savvy musical genius who writes melodies. He's glad to get away from playing essentially Mr. Nice Guys.

GARBER WAS Jesus in a production of "Godspell" in Toronto, where he shared the stage with Gilda Radner. Later, at age 21, he played Jesus in the movie version of "Godspell" shot on location in New York.

He's seen some of his friends — including Ms. Radner, w. o. is from Detroit — "shoot to stardom."

Garber doesn't view himself yet as a star. But he did receive a Tony Award nomination for his role of a seemingly innocent young man who is actually quite diabolical in the Broadway hit "Deathtrap."

After "Deathtrap," he went into the cast of "Sweeney Todd," playing a sailor, but he left after six months to go to California to seek film and TV work. There he auditioned for the road company of "They're Playing Our Song."

And he's been on the road for more than a year.

"We don't ever let down. We're there to entertain the audience."

—Victor Garber

Garber travels light, with "a couple of trunks and a guitar." He's getting homesick, however, for New York and hopes to return there after the show plays Toronto this spring.

"They're Playing Our Song" is a high-energy musical that demands a lot of its two versatile stars. Ms. Skaggs joined the cast about nine months ago, replacing his original leading lady on the road.

DETROIT AUDIENCES have fallen in love with the zesty musical, its fabulous title-song production number and its two delightful stars who convey the magic of a couple falling in love.

Fisher public relations man Jon Essex describes this as their "chemistry" on stage. He said the show has been pulling in \$250,000 a week.

"They're Playing Our Song" opened in October and runs through Dec. 20. On weekends, the stars play two shows a day and they meet the challenge with vigor.

"We keep it fresh," Garber said. "We don't ever let down. We're there to entertain the audience."

In the show, Ms. Skaggs is Sonia Walks, an uninhibited woman who is just becoming known as a lyricist and gets the chance to work with the famous composer Vernon Gersch, portrayed by Garber.

With music by Marvin Hamlisch and lyrics by Carole Bayer Sager, "They're Playing Our Song" is based on the realistic working relationship and romance between Hamlisch and Ms. Sager.

ON STAGE, Garber moves through his dance routines, as the serious-minded composer unbending, with an easy, exciting grace. He is matched by Ms. Scagg's lively quaities.

Garber used to sing with a musical group called the Sugar Shop, and he composes songs himself. He describes himself as a folk singer, but the music in "They're Playing Our Song" is a flashy, contemporary sound.

The show also has stunning, highly innovative, cleanly styled stage sets.

You'd wonder how Garber can keep up the pace on stage. Garber said he doesn't go out much, and he keeps himself together with "disciplines."

During a Thursday afternoon interview, he offered a cup of herbal tea, although he said he prefers coffee.

He doesn't get home from the theater until midnight, but gets up around 9 or 9:30 a.m. "I like to read, listen to music, write letters and do exercises in the afternoon," he said.

HE DOES a combination of jogging, yoga and stretching exercises. "I do them every day. If I don't, I'm not comfortable on stage."

In Birmingham, he jogs down Southfield Road and across Maple to Quarters Lake.

"When I'm real 'good' I eat a lot of grains, vegetables and fruits," he said. "I don't eat a lot of meat. As a performer, it wears you down. I eat my main meal around 5 p.m."

In the show's catch-fire number "They're Playing Our Song," first the composer and later the lyricist jump up from their table at the disco to exclaim, "They're playing my song."

Each dances about, shushes the other to hear better, and finally falls on knees, spectacularly, to the floor.

"The first time I did it full out in a run-through, I thought I'd collapse in a heap," Garber recalled. But now he knows just how much energy to use and doesn't use any muscles he doesn't have to.

DURING THE run of the show in Detroit, Garber has been sharing a Birmingham townhouse with Orrin Beilby, his standby in the musical. Beilby filled in recently when Garber went to London, Ontario to visit his father and brother's family and to Marin County in California to visit friends.

Garber said he loves the show. "Marsha and I are very lucky to have each other," he said about his co-star. "We both work the same way. When you get to know somebody on stage, it becomes very intimate."

"Marsha and I are just having a good time together. It's a love story and the audience has to care."

He credits having been in the show a year with giving him the opportunity to develop the character of Vernon to the fullest.

It's basically a two-person show. Garber and Ms. Skaggs each have an on-stage singing trio dressed like their character. Vernon and Sonia have only their "voices" to back them up, for occasional support.

Garber and Ms. Skaggs keep the show happening with their onstage rapport.

"We're still listening to each other," he said. "We haven't gone on automatic pilot."

Ms. Skaggs has rented a townhouse in the same Birmingham complex.



Victor Garber stars in "They're Playing Our Song" which is currently playing at the Fisher Theatre.

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—Victor Garber

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