

**John Kander: Passing Through Curtains**

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In conversation with

Frank J. Oteri

at Kander's home in

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John Kander knew that he wanted to write music for the theatre from his earliest childhood. He wrote his very first song instead of paying attention during his second grade math class and had already completed a musical for his high school. A protégé of Douglas Moore and Jack Beeson, with whom he studied composition at Columbia, Kander eventually found himself accompanying singers, conducting summer stock productions, and playing in the pit orchestra for *West Side Story*. One thing led to another and he wrote the music for the short-lived 1962 Broadway musical, *A Family Affair* which Harold Prince directed. As Kander explains:

The theater community is very small. Once you pass through a curtain which lets people look at you as a professional, you can really get to or make contact with just about anybody from one or two degrees of separation.

Later that year, Kander met lyricist Fred Ebb which proved to be the most important encounter of his entire career. Kander and Ebb sustained one of the longest lasting as well as one of the most successful of songwriting collaborations in the history of the American musical theater. Only months after they began writing songs together, Barbara Streisand recorded two of them. And a few years later they landed on Broadway with their score for *Flora the Red Menace*, about a Depression-era ingénue (Liza Minnelli in her debut) who unwittingly joins the Communist Party. But it was their second Broadway musical together, *Cabaret*, which solidified their reputation. Against all odds, they transformed Christopher Isherwood's unlikely narrative about sexual awakening amidst the rise of the Nazis in the final years of the Weimar Republic into one of the most popular song and dance extravaganzas of all time. Says Kander:

I can remember when we were writing *Cabaret* and were talking about the subject, people said "That's really not a good idea." I don't remember reviews very often, but there's one line in the *Variety* review for *Cabaret* which I will always remember: "It is unlikely there will be much of an audience for this sort of thing." It all has to do with people's imaginations, what you find theatrical and what you don't.

Kander and Ebb's landmark partnership also yielded such classics of the Broadway canon as *Zorba*, *Chicago* (currently on stage at the Ambassador Theatre and the longest-running revival in Broadway history), *Woman of the Year*, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*—all challenging shows which respectively deal with such difficult atypical Broadway topics as revenge killings, corrupt

trials, the private life of a celebrity reporter, and prison torture. In between, they found time to write songs for cabaret acts and motion pictures, the most popular of which remains "New York, New York," which has been performed by everyone from Frank Sinatra to the Three Tenors. But perhaps unsurprisingly, given the vagaries of the Great White Way, not every one of their efforts has been a blockbuster. However, some of the lesser known items in their oeuvre—such as *The Rink* (a poignant mother-daughter face-off), *Steel Pier* (about rigged dance marathons in the heyday of Atlantic City), and *70, Girls, 70* (exploring the shenanigans of the residents of a retirement home)—are extremely worth revisiting. Luckily there have been recordings of all of their Broadway output as well as of *Go Fly a Kite*, an industrial musical they wrote on hire for General Electric.

Kander and Ebb wrote almost all of their music and lyrics together in the same room and their collaborative process was so fruitful that they did not work on projects with anyone else for the duration of their creative partnership, which only ended when Ebb died in 2004. Actually not quite, since Kander has spent the last six years finishing work on four musicals that were left in various stages of development at the time of Ebb's death:

I just channeled Fred as much as I can. I had done a lot of lyric writing before I met Fred and in our collaboration we bounced off into each other's territories freely a lot. When there were new songs to be written for these projects, at first I was nervous about it. Then I got a little more confident. Every once in a while I look up and say, "Where are you, you son of a bitch!" But I've enjoyed doing that; I got to flex my lyricist muscles a lot.

The first of these shows, *Curtains*, ran over a year on Broadway, while two others—*All About Us* (based on Thornton Wilder's zanily experimental play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*) and *The Visit* (inspired by a macabre Dürrenmatt play)—have been mounted outside of New York City. Their final show, *The Scottsboro Boys* (about the wrongful, racially-motivated incarceration of nine African American young men in Alabama in the 1930s), just completed a successful off-Broadway run and will be mounted on Broadway next season.

Kander, now in his 80s, once said that he would not work on anything or with anyone else until these four projects were brought to fruition. But now that all four of these shows have been produced, it seemed like a good time to talk with him about his career thus far and what his plans for the future might be. Talking to him was a time portal to a by-gone era when the Broadway musical was central to American popular culture—after all, he is one of the last surviving composers who was around during Broadway's Golden Age. But there was very little time or inclination for nostalgia. Indeed, Kander's determination, creative process, and overall positive outlook make him an excellent role model for composers of all stripes nowadays.

—FJO

**Frank J. Oteri:** I'm curious about where your interest in writing music for the Broadway theatre began. What was your exposure to musicals growing up in Kansas City?

**John Kander:** I've always been kind of a musical schizophrenic. Classical music is where I lived mostly, but I was also always interested in popular music, and in theatre music particularly. My brother was, too, and my father. We now loftily call it musical theatre, but in those days musical comedy songs accounted for about fifty percent of the popular songs that the whole country knew. When that changed, I'm not exactly sure, but I grew up in a tradition of listening to a lot of that as well as listening to all the Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Met. As a matter of fact, when I was in high school I had a picture of Lotte Lehmann as the Marschallin at one end of my bureau and a picture of Gertrude Lawrence at the other end. And I thought if I ever ran away from home, I'd run away to one of these two women, but I wasn't sure which, though not for a second realizing the symbolism of that. I guess that's a long-winded way of saying that I've just always been attracted in both directions.

**FJO:** So when you first started composing music, what did you compose?

**JK:** The first thing I wrote was in second grade during arithmetic class. The teacher asked me a question, which of course I couldn't answer. And so she said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm writing a Christmas carol." And so she came to the back of the room where I was sitting and there it was with big notes and all the words about Jesus in the manger and all of that. She made me stay after school and she played it. And they sang it at the Christmas program. This is all faint to me now, but I found out years later that she had called my parents to say, "I just want to let you know that John wrote a Christmas carol; is that all right because I know you're Jewish?" And they said that was O.K. And so that, I suppose, was the beginning of my downfall.

**FJO:** So does that Christmas carol still survive anywhere?

**JK:** I hope not.

**FJO:** It's interesting that for that very first composition you wrote both words and music.

**JK:** Yeah, I didn't know that there was anything else that you did. I certainly didn't want to do my math exercise. I'm one of those lucky people who always had something I loved to do. I thought that everybody had a passion for something until I got into college and realized that wasn't so and that I was just lucky. Music was in my life from the time I was four years old. It just seemed like a natural part of the world that I lived in. There were no professional musicians in the family, but my dad loved to sing and there were children's concerts that I went to. I got a record player when I was 10, and from then on that was all I wanted, recordings, mostly operas. But I didn't draw much of a line between opera and musical theatre. I was always attracted to the idea of words and music together telling a story. It sounds phony, but it's true. It's just something that I did and didn't think about a lot. I wrote a show for high school and a couple of other local shows, but it was just a part of life. And I assumed that my life would continue in that direction. I didn't feel special and I didn't feel removed from the world around me or my friends.

**FJO:** Does that first show survive?

**JK:** I don't know. Songs from it do. I wrote that with a friend of mine in senior class. It was the senior show and it was 1944. We were all going off to war. I remember we had written this sort of anthem called "Carry On" and all the mothers were weeping at the end of it because their sons were going off to be slaughtered in battle. We all came back. I don't think anybody saw any serious action; I certainly didn't. But when I think back to that big emotional moment, which all of us in our class were playing to the hilt, it makes me smile a little.

**FJO:** So what did you do right after you got back from the war?

**JK:** I went to Oberlin, where I graduated in 1951. And then I came to New York, where I went to grad school at Columbia, and I've been here ever since.

**FJO:** At Columbia I know that one of your mentors was Jack Beeson, who is one of the great American opera composers.

**JK:** Yes, he and Douglas Moore. I came to New York trying to decide where I wanted to go to grad school. I didn't particularly want to go to Columbia. I was sort of interested in Yale. But a friend of mine, a girl who had graduated a year before me, was Douglas Moore's assistant, and she thought I ought to go and talk to Douglas. It didn't interest me very much, and it certainly didn't interest him very much. But as a favor to her, he said, "I've got ten minutes before I go to the country." So I had an appointment with him and we talked for almost two hours and became great friends. And I stopped looking. I wanted to go to Columbia and Douglas and I struck up a friendship. Jack Beeson was my first composition teacher. And they became my surrogate family in New York. We always said that Jack was Douglas's legitimate son and I was Douglas's illegitimate son, because of the directions that we went in. But I was then still sort of schizophrenic musically, and Douglas one drunken night said, "You know if I had it to do all over again, I think I'd write for Broadway." And that was the kind of kick in the ass that I needed to help me focus on the direction that I wanted to go.

**FJO:** When you say schizophrenic, what other kinds of music were you writing?

**JK:** I was writing some chamber music, a couple of orchestral pieces, and a one-act opera that was my thesis. When I look back on it, it's like every composer I'd ever heard went into my head and stayed there. It was second-rate Stravinsky and second-rate Menotti, maybe not so second-rate but recycled; it didn't have any voice. Much later on, maybe ten or twelve years ago, I started writing art songs where I think maybe I've found a little bit more of a personal voice.

**FJO:** I'm curious about what happened immediately after this epiphany inspired by Douglas Moore's drunken proclamation. I know that you wound up being a rehearsal pianist for *West Side Story*.

**JK:** That's the end of a long story. I had an assistantship in the Opera Workshop at Columbia when I was getting my master's, which essentially meant playing and coaching singers. So I supported myself that way when I got out. Everything sort of leads to something else: I was playing a lot of auditions as well as coaching and that led to me getting a job in summer stock as an assistant conductor. I had studied conducting at Columbia.

So first I was an assistant conductor, then a conductor in stock and also toured as a two-piano accompaniment to Beatrice Lillie when she was on tour. Jobs came. I found that my hands helped me a lot during the '50s. I always seemed to be able to get a job playing. I'm not a very aggressive sort of fellow, but fortunately if you do what you do as well as you can, opportunities present themselves.

I was conducting an off-Broadway show called *Conversation Piece* when *West Side Story* opened. But I was at the party. I was trying to get a drink and it was like five deep at the bar. This little short man was standing in front of me and saw my dilemma and said, "What do you want? I'll order it for you." So he got me a drink and we talked and he turned out to be the pianist for *West Side Story*. We kept up an occasional conversation over the year, and he had to leave, so he needed a sub and he asked me if I would be interested. So I said yes. I just said yes a lot in those days. So for three weeks I was playing in the pit for *West Side Story*. And while I was playing in the pit, Ruth Mitchell who was the stage manager had to put in some new people, and for that you usually call the pianist from the orchestra to rehearse. So I was playing all those rehearsals.

And then she went on to become the stage manager for *Gypsy* and she needed somebody to play the auditions. So she asked me to do that and I said yes. So for weeks and weeks and weeks I was there playing piano for people who came in to audition for Jerome Robbins. And so he got used to me, and at the end of that period, he said literally, "Hey, do you want to do this show with me?" And I said, "Do you want me to?" And he said yes, and I said yes. So I became the dance music arranger for *Gypsy*, and from that I did the dance music for another show, *Irma La Douce*.



A young John Kander (far right) relaxing with stage legend Beatrice Lillie (reading).



The original cast album is one of the only historical documents that survives from John Kander's first musical on Broadway, *A Family Affair* (1962).

The theater community is very small. Once you pass through a curtain which lets people look at you as a professional, you can really get to or make contact with just about anybody from one or two degrees of separation. It's sort of a long story, but my two closest friends, with whom I shared an apartment at that time, were James and William Goldman. The three of us had known each other since we were children. And we had written a musical together [*A Family Affair*] that we tried to get on and did get on [Broadway] because of some help from people that we knew. It was a flop, but Hal Prince came in at the last ten days and directed it, because we were in serious trouble and he made it almost work. And I believe it was the first thing that he ever directed as well.

**FJO:** But how did you get to meet Harold Prince, just through your connections to the people you knew from the shows you had previously worked on?

**JK:** I'm trying to think. As I said, the community is very small. And when Jim and Bill and I had our apartment on West 72nd Street, nine rooms for 275 dollars a month, we just got to know people. Mary Rodgers was there. And Sondheim. I can't remember the first time I met Hal.

**FJO:** For a flop musical, *A Family Affair* didn't do so badly. There's a cast album that was released on United Artists, which gave you an imprimatur. And it's a nice album.

**JK:** There were wonderful people in it. The thing about all of this—I've always said this—is that if I had been more aggressive and had been able to get my own drink at the opening night of *West Side Story*, I would never have had a career, because everything stemmed from that. I've always thought back: If I'd been a little taller or if I'd waved my arms a little higher and the bartender had noticed me, I'd still be playing the piano somewhere, I guess.

**FJO:** Of course the next big part of the beginning of this story is your first meeting Fred Ebb.

**JK:** Dick Seff was the agent for Jim, Bill, and me—Jim's plays and Billy's novels. Dick really worked hard and saw to it that *A Family Affair* happened. And he must have brought Fred to the backer's audition, but I don't remember meeting him at that time.

What I remember is that we were signed to a publisher named Tommy Valando, and it turned out that Fred was, too. And Tommy at one point—this was after *A Family Affair*—said, "I think you should meet Fred Ebb; I think you two would get along together." That would have been in 1962.

And so we did meet and we did get along. Fred and I began writing together almost immediately. And we wrote a lot. We wrote in the same room and at the same time. It started off that way and it stayed that way until the end of his life. That's really all there is to the story. It started and it never ended.

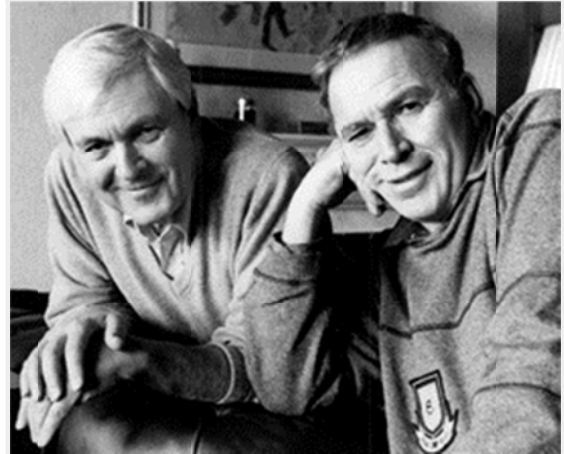
**FJO:** What's so amazing to me is that before you wrote a show together you wrote these two songs together very early on, and they wound up on a Barbara Streisand record. And legend has it that one of them was written at a dinner party.

**JK:** That's true! We were very fast. It was at Fred's apartment. He had some friends over for dinner which was very unusual [for Fred]. I can't remember how long we had been working together [at that point], but we were talking about how fast we wrote together which was really strange. I guess we were kind of boasting and we said that if they'd clear the table between dessert and coffee, we would write a song. They took us up on the challenge, so we went to the piano and both of us sat on the piano bench. And Fred said, "What'll we write about?" And I said, "I don't know; I don't care much." And he said, "Play a waltz." And we wrote a song called "I Don't Care Much" before coffee which oddly enough—and though this sounds like vanity, it's not—sometimes you can write something in fifteen minutes that is really good in the same way that you can work on something for three weeks and it can really be lousy and sound labored. This was one of the songs that just sort of came out.

**FJO:** You mentioned that when you got together with Fred Ebb, you would create music and words at the same time. Did either of you ever come to a writing session with something already written: a lyric or a melody line?

**JK:** Rarely. But every once in a while when we were separated, Fred would have a lyrical idea and write out a verse. When we were writing *Cabaret*, he had an idea for a song called "Meeskite." But I was in Long Island. And he called and had read me a version of that over the phone, and so I copied it down and then set it, and we revised it when we got together. But those moments were rare.

Mostly, I would say ninety percent of what we wrote, we wrote in the same room at the same time. I've said this often: Fred could improvise in rhyme and meter in the same way that I could improvise. And we would get a phrase or a rhythm. But before any of that happened, when we were writing a theatre piece, which is mostly what we were doing, we would talk a lot. Sometimes we'd even play the roles until we could find the voice of the person who was singing



One of the longest songwriting collaborations in the history of the American musical theater: John Kander and Fred Ebb.

or the people who were singing. Then it would evolve into song. Fred was very inventive and would frequently have thoughts that I would not have thought of on my own. But I don't ever remember handing him a melody and saying, "Put a lyric to this." It never worked that way.

He had a little study in his apartment. I went to his house mostly. He lived four blocks from here. I liked to go out for work and he liked to stay home. In that room is where most of the work got done.

**FJO:** How frequently would you meet?

**JK:** If we were working on a show, we'd work every day.

**FJO:** Including weekends?

**JK:** No. I like to go to the country. The normal pattern was going to Fred's house at about 10 or 10:30 [A.M.] and we went until about 3 [P.M.]. We were very different people in terms of our interests and personalities and friends and maybe even outlook on the world. But when we got in that little studio room of his, we became almost like one person. It was amazing, because that never changed.

**FJO:** What I find so remarkable about your collaboration is that all those years neither of you ever worked with anyone else.

**JK:** It just didn't seem like a lot of fun. I did some movie scores. Fred did some special material occasionally. But the idea of doing a project—I don't know; I think we kinda got spoiled, because of the way we wrote. It's not a way of working that you can export. A lot of people don't work that way and would be very uncomfortable working that way. When Fred and I were working together in the room anything was possible. You didn't have to worry about making a fool of yourself—a bad joke, a really lousy melodic line. We were free in there. And I think that one of the things that made it possible for us to do good work when we did good work was the fact that we allowed ourselves to do bad work and tear it up. We didn't work with a censor over our shoulders. We could try anything.

**FJO:** Was there ever something that one of you thought was good work and the other thought was bad work?

**JK:** A final product?

**FJO:** No, something while you were working.

**JK:** Yes. But if either of us had a passion for it, the other person would go with it. It was like an unspoken rule.

**FJO:** One of the strangest projects you were involved with earlier in your collaboration with Fred Ebb was a full-length "industrial" musical commissioned by General Electric for a



convention of their employees. I'm too young to have ever seen one of these industrial musicals, but there were lots of them.

**JK:** It was a different world then. An industrial show was on the magnitude of a Broadway show for some product. And the Oldsmobile show, for instance, and the General Electric show were yearly things. They would employ a lot of people from Broadway—they would have stars—and pay them handsomely, and writers the same way. I think those are gone now, but it was a very common thing.



Joanna Lester sings "Make a Woman Out of Your Wife" from General Electric's *Go Fly a Kite* presented at the 5th Electric Utility Executives Conference in Williamsburg VA, September 19-21, 1966.

There was a General Electric show which we were very happy to get, because it paid well. I conducted a couple of industrial shows, too. There are some funny stories connected with those. You would have a certain amount of freedom, but you had to sell the product at some point. They were sort of fun, and they were very lucrative. Every chorus kid on Broadway was eager to get those jobs, which meant you had to get to work early in the morning, but they paid a lot of money.

**FJO:** There's even a cast album of your industrial show, *Go Fly a Kite*; I tracked down a copy of it on eBay a few years ago. But it was never commercially released.

**JK:** No, those were never intended for commercial release. I never remember anyone saying, "A song from this industrial show, oh boy, somebody else is going to sing it." It was sort of a separate world.

**FJO:** But the songs in that show are quite good. "Be Direct with Me" is wonderful, and "Heaven Out of Hell" and "Make a Woman Out of Your Wife" are a hoot.

**JK:** I can't really remember it. I've always thought there were two reasons to write for the theatre. One is to write what you love. And the other is for money. They're both perfectly respectable as long as you know the difference.

**FJO:** So when you wrote music for an industrial show, did you have to relinquish your rights to the material?

**JK:** I don't even know. In those days I think we were just for hire. And when I was a dance arranger for *Gypsy* and *Irma La Douce*, the dance arrangers didn't get a percentage of anything in those days. They got like three thousand dollars and that was it.

**FJO:** But there are quite a few shows you did for love and, luckily, for money as well, very lucrative shows like *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, and in more recent years, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. It's interesting to hear you describe the process as fun, because though these shows are all fun,

remarkably, their plots are very decidedly not fun. The subject matter is so dark: the rise of Nazism, sensational murder trials, torture. Your most recent show, *The Scottsboro Boys*, is about racial injustice. These are very serious topics, and a far cry from what might be considered fun Broadway fare. But you've found a way to get a message across in all of these shows and have them also be fun.

**JK:** When I say fun I was talking about working. I don't know how to explain it: working is fun. It was for us, and it depends on your collaborators, but most of the time our collaborations were with people that we really felt warmly towards and with whom we could be free. And a good collaboration is a wonderful time. This last work, the collaboration on *Scottsboro*, was one of the great joys of my life. Fred died in 2004, but David Thompson and Susan Stroman and I over these last few years have had a wonderful time. As grim as that piece is, and intentionally so, the process is fun. The excitement of the process—and I hope I'm not sounding too lofty—of trying to make art in a collaborative way with people whom you respect and/or love is pretty good.

**FJO:** But what has attracted you to create so many shows that deal with grim, social charged issues?

**JK:** I don't think that we ever started something with the idea that we were sending a message. *Cabaret* was brought to us; that was Hal [Prince]. Two weeks before *Flora, the Red Menace* opened, Hal said, "Whatever happens with *Flora*, we'll meet the next day and start to work on the next piece."

And *Flora* was not successful, but that was *Cabaret*. For the most part, from then on we were able to work on the pieces we wanted to work on, so some of the things came from us. I think the thing that attracted us to any piece of material was its theatricality. We feel strongly politically about something—about the things these pieces are discussing—but I don't think we ever set out to do good deeds. With *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Fred just said the title, "Kiss of the Spider Woman." And I said yes. And we got on the phone and the next person we spoke to was Hal Prince. And we simply said the title and Hal said yes. It wasn't because it was a great message for the world, that was tangential, it was because it was immediately theatrical. What could be more theatrical and musically theatrical than a story half of which takes place in somebody's mind summoning up movies in contrast to the grim atmosphere where he's living? All three of us saw the possibilities of that immediately. And when you look back on it, it's quite clear that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* would be quite an attractive thing to set musically. But whenever we told anybody what we were working on they thought we were just crazy.



Rehearsing *Flora the Red Menace* (1965), left to right: Harold Prince, George Abbott, Liza Minnelli, Bob Dishy, John Kander (seated at piano), Fred Ebb

I can remember when we were writing *Cabaret* and were talking about the subject, people said "That's really not a good idea."



From Kander and Ebb's most successful musical, *Cabaret* (1966): Joel Grey and company at the Kit Kat Club.

I don't remember reviews very often, but there's one line in the *Variety* review for *Cabaret* which I will always remember: "It is unlikely there will be much of an audience for this sort of thing." It all has to do with people's imaginations, what you find theatrical and what you don't.

What is hardest, I think, and I see evidence of it all over the place, including our own work, is to do a simple contemporary boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. What worked in the early intermezzos operatically, the little opera buffas that were written in the 17th and 18th centuries, are hard. I'm relating this

because it's really all the same. It's hard to take those stories and find anything new and interesting.

**FJO:** Of all your shows, the one that seems closest to boy meets girl is *Steel Pier*, although there are lots of underpinnings around it.

**JK:** Oh, no! That's not true! *Steel Pier* is about *all* the people in it. The boy meets girl part almost came as an afterthought. The thing that attracted us to it—and it's one of my favorite experiences I've had in the theatre—is the dance marathons. What we had to do, which was hard, is to diminish all these other stories until we could find a hook to move us through the evening. But it was like *Spider Woman*, the first thing we were attracted to is the thing that feels theatrical, and that is the atmosphere.

What's closer to boy meets girl is *Woman of the Year*. That is a standard story, and consequently was much more difficult to write. I'm very pleased that it was successful and that we got an award for it, but we did not do our best work on it.

**FJO:** I think the duet you wrote for the lead character and the woman who married her ex-husband, "Grass is Always Greener," is pretty unique.

**JK:** That was fun, but I meant it was harder to give that a fresh color than something which takes place in pre-Nazi Germany, or on Crete [*Zorba*], or at a dance marathon, or a prison in Latin America.

**FJO:** That raises another interesting issue. At the very beginning of our conversation you were saying that once upon a time about fifty percent of popular music was music that came out of Broadway musicals and that is no longer the case, and it hasn't been for decades at this point. But you circumvent that issue in your shows by taking them outside of the here and now. Even *Steel Pier* takes place in another era. And shows like *The Happy Time* and *The Rink* are all about reliving memories. *A Family Affair* took place in the present, but when you wrote it the sound of Broadway show music was still part of mainstream popular music. But the only later show of yours I can think of that takes place completely in the present is *70, Girls, 70*. However since that show is about elderly people who live in a retirement home, it's perfectly natural that the kind of music they sing would sound like music from an earlier era.



*Woman of the Year* (1981): (left to right) Peter Stone, Lauren Bacall, Ebb, Harry Guardino, Kander and other members of the original cast.



*70, Girls, 70* (1971), one of the few Kander and Ebb shows to take place in the present tense, closed on Broadway after only 35 performances.

**JK:** I have a theory about that and it has to do with operas as well as musicals. If you look at it realistically, ordinary people during their ordinary day do not suddenly burst into song. If you look at the operas that have lived and the musicals that have lived, they all are at some remove from the audience. There are very few exceptions. If you look at all the Jerome Kern musicals with those wonderful songs in them, all of which were contemporary comedies, the only one which lives as a piece is *Show Boat* because it was at a remove. It has an atmosphere that is exotic to the audience.

When *Traviata* was first premiered, there were a lot of things that went wrong with it. But one of those things that was wrong was that it was in contemporary costume. At the revival, they went back one generation or two, at which point it developed its reputation and, as you know, it's not exactly a popular hit [smiles]. Even Gilbert and Sullivan were at a remove from the audience.

Now think of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals which have lasted. The only ones that really didn't work all that well for an audience were the ones which were contemporary in the sense of being ordinary life.

**FJO:** Like *Allegro*.

**JK:** Even *Me and Juliet*, which is about the theatre. So the pieces of ours which seem to work best and lasted longer are pieces which are at some sort of remove. I just think it's true of musical theatre almost totally. The Menotti pieces seem to be dealing with contemporary subjects, but again in an exotic way.

**FJO:** But by having the plotline situated at an historical remove, it also gives you an opportunity as a composer to evoke those earlier styles rather than trying to be part of whatever we think the zeitgeist is.



*Steel Pier* (1997) was the last Kander and Ebb show to be produced on Broadway before Fred Ebb's death in 2004.

**JK:** Right. I think that works on the writers as well as it does on the audience. But it is true. Try to think of how many operas are in the standard repertory which took place in the time of the audience when they were written.

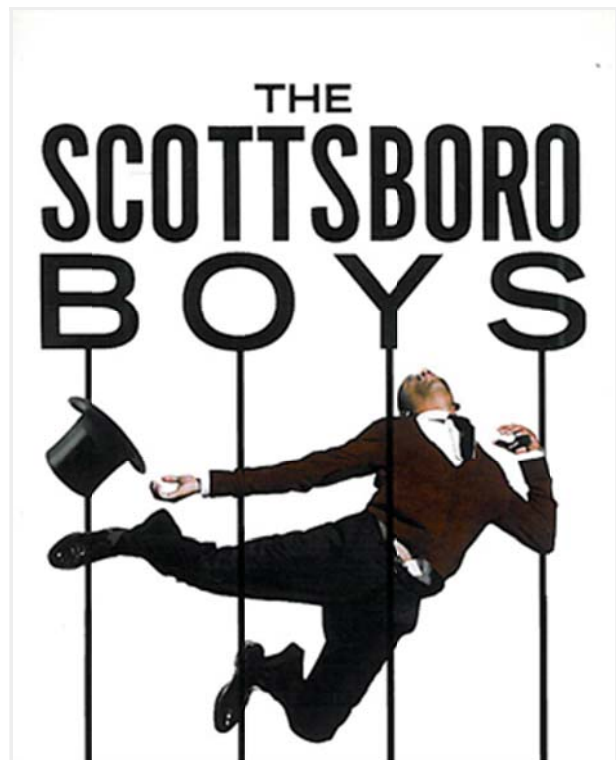
**FJO:** It's staggering to me that when Fred Ebb died, there were four shows the two of you had been working on that were not yet finished. Since then both *The Visit* and *All About Us* have been produced out of town and *Curtains* ran for over a year on Broadway. And now *The Scottsboro Boys* has been having a very successful run on Off-Broadway and will be moving to Broadway next season. I'm curious about what your process was for completing these shows without him over the past six years.

**JK:** I just channeled Fred as much as I can. I had done a lot of lyric writing before I met Fred and in our collaboration

we bounced off into each other's territories freely a lot. When there were new songs to be written for these projects, at first I was nervous about it. Then I got a little more confident. Every once in a while I look up and say, "Where are you, you son of a bitch!" But I've enjoyed doing that; I got to flex my lyricist muscles a lot.

**FJO:** I remember reading somewhere that you wouldn't work on a new project with someone until all four of the unfinished Kander and Ebb shows had been brought to life; now they have. So what's next?

**JK:** At the moment I'm working with a young writer named Greg Pierce on some very, very small chamber pieces—three short stories—which you could do in this living room. They're going to use just four instruments and the same four actors in all three stories. We finished one of them and did a little workshop for ourselves with a few people listening. And we're halfway through the second one. I remember standing upstairs and thinking, "What do I really feel like doing right now?" And I think because the projects I had been doing with Fred were large, suddenly the idea of doing something really, really tiny appealed to me. And so I approached this friend of mine who is a short story writer and we started. So that's something—once *Scottsboro* gets itself worked



The final Kander and Ebb show, *The Scottsboro Boys*, is coming to Broadway next season.

out—that I'm eager to get back to.

**FJO:** You mentioned writing art songs. I know that Renée Fleming sang a wonderful song that you had written for her.

**JK:** We're back to fun again. It's hard to imagine not writing, so it's what I do. It's what I've done since second grade. Someday I'll stop, because I'll die, but I can't ever imagine not feeling or thinking musico-theatrically, and by that I mean songs which have a certain theatricality to them as well.

**FJO:** So to get back to your observation that if you do what you do as well as you can, things will happen and people will notice—

**JK:** —I don't know that things will happen. I was very lucky. As a pianist and sometime conductor, I played well and I enjoyed coaching, and some things came from that. If I had had to go knock on doors, I would have starved to death.

**FJO:** So what would be your advice to people starting out now who want to create the kinds of work that you've done.

**JK:** It is so much harder. When Fred and I were starting out, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick were already established and Steve Sondheim was just starting and Jerry Herman had just started. We were all allowed to fail. We were part of a generation where there was so much being done that if people thought you were talented the chances are that they would listen to your work and maybe hire you. It's so much more difficult now. Theatre is so expensive to produce.

The only advice I could have for anybody is if you really love something, if your passions are what sustain you through life, then you just have to find some way to survive and to support your passion. I have an actress friend who loves the theatre. She is a great actress. Her name is Debra Monk. And she once told me that she told her agent that if she could have five lines in any movie she'd say yes and earn a living so she could support her habit, which is playing in the theatre where you can often not make any money. You have to find some way, if you're a composer or if theatre is what you love, you have to find some way to support yourself while you're doing it. We had it easy. My generation had it really, really easy. Hal Prince used to produce a musical for \$160,000. They all did. And if a show ran for a year it was a success. That's not true anymore. These are different times. And the music business is different. But all I can say is if you love something, don't let go of it.