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[Lost Ellington Broadway musical haunted writer, who made it sing again](#)

- [Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Dale Wasserman spent decades tracking down and reassembling the score and script to "Beggar's Holiday," the 1946 John LaTouche-Duke Ellington musical that broke racial barriers but flickered out after a few months and disappeared into the annals of Broadway also-rans.

Wasserman, who went on to write the hit stage shows "Man of La Mancha" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," co-produced "Beggar's Holiday" with Perry Watkins. It was based on John Gay's blockbuster 1728 English satire "The Beggar's Opera," which also inspired the biting Brecht-Weill Weimar-era classic "The Threepenny Opera." It always bothered him that the 1946 musical -- Ellington's only full realized Broadway show, and the first to use black and white performers interchangeably, with an interracial romance that brought pickets to the Great White Way -- lacked cohesion and didn't fulfill its promise.

"It stuck in my craw," says Wasserman, whose new contemporary version of "Beggar's Holiday" premiered Tuesday night at Marin Theatre Company. Lee Sankowich, who produced and directed the long-running San Francisco production of "Cuckoo's Nest," directs the show. Christopher Neal Jackson, who played Simba in "The Lion King" on Broadway, stars as the blind beggar who envisions himself as a dangerously seductive hoodlum in a dream fantasy that plays out on the streets of some nameless American city.

Wasserman helped shape the concept of the original Broadway production, which ran for 108 performances, but "I left the show at a certain point, and I've been ashamed of it ever since," the writer says on the phone from his home in Paradise Valley, Ariz. "If the ship is sinking, one should go down with it.

"That's one of the reasons I made up my mind to rethink the show, reorganize it and bring it back. It's been a long haul, 50 years."

Only five of the show's 27 songs were ever published, and there never really was a complete score. Over the years, Wasserman pieced together various lead sheets, bits of orchestration and bootleg recordings (some featuring the sublime alto saxophone of Johnny Hodges, sighing over shifting clouds of Ellington color). He found some material at the Smithsonian Institution, got a score from the show's original music director, Max Meth, "who was on his last legs," and other music from arranger Luther Henderson, an Ellington associate who died earlier this year.

Once he had the material in hand, Wasserman set to work writing a new book for it. LaTouche was a poet who wrote lovely lyrics, Wasserman says, but he didn't write much of a book, and what there was didn't really work. Wasserman also updated lyrics, tossed out some and wrote new ones.

The show's language and details have changed, "but the basic point of view remains the same: It questions everything," Wasserman says. "Particularly the forms of hypocrisy we meet in our methods of communications and in our politics, and in terms of American materialism."

He liked the original Broadway piece because "it is a very realistic assessment of politics and

morality in general. Whatever 'The Beggar's Opera' said in 1728, you can say today just about double. Times and circumstances have changed, but it's the same corruption and mendacity, the things we experience both in our government and social life. They're precisely the same things that were satirized in 1728. The scope of the corruption and mendacity has grown," Wasserman says in a warm, growly baritone, pronouncing "Men-da- city" like Burl Ives in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

The 1946 show, which was directed by George Abbott and starred Alfred Drake, Libby Holman, Zero Mostel and Avon Long, brought forth a few notable Ellington numbers, like the swinging "Tomorrow Mountain," recorded by Lena Horne, and the rich ballad "Brown Penny," with lyrics LaTouche cribbed from Yeats. But the music is a potpourri of styles that sometimes lacks the distinctive Ellington touch.

Wasserman, who doesn't give his age, worked closely with Ellington, who apparently was not at ease writing music to fit lyrics, and with LaTouche, whose Broadway credits include "Cabin in the Sky" and "Candide."

He met daily at the Chelsea Hotel to work on the show with LaTouche, who encouraged Wasserman to quit producing and directing and become a writer, which he eventually did.

"Some of the music is wonderful," says Wasserman, who went on the road with the Ellington orchestra, working with the maestro in his hotel suite in the wee small hours of the morning after the band finished its gigs. He remembers staying with the band at a "Jim Crow" hotel in Cincinnati called the Manse for two weeks, sitting at the piano bench with Ellington between 1 and 5 a.m. as the composer searched for the sounds that would suit LaTouche's lyrics.

"I'd set the lyrics on the piano and Duke would noodle and say to Sweetpea (the nickname of Ellington's longtime collaborator Billy Strayhorn), 'Do you remember that riff we did about three years ago?' He had an amazing number of things -- themes, fragments, riffs -- that he reworked. He adapted them to the mood of the lyrics," or wrote new music when needed. "He got a great deal of help from two people," Wasserman adds: "Strayhorn and Luther Henderson."

There are some hip tunes in the show, like "I Wanna Be Bad" ("It's delicious to be vicious") and "Tooth and Claw," which bring sardonic songwriters like Dave Frishberg and Blossom Dearie to mind. And some cornball stuff like the love ballad "When I Walk With You," whose lyrics include lines such as, "When I walk with you down a crowded avenue/ In a sea of empty faces, only your smile comes through." Wasserman has written new lyrics for it.

"I made a joke of it," says Wasserman, who loves "Maybe I Should Change My Ways," with its blue notes and seductive, muted minor chords reminiscent of "Mood Indigo."

"I really put the mockery in it. I've put them all in a different context, aiming to make the play very funny, but carrying a real sting under its comedy."

Donald York, the show's musical director, finds much to admire in the original score, particularly the harmonically rich "Maybe I Should Change My Ways" and the buoyant "Take Love Easy." But he suspects that Ellington may have farmed out some of the music for "Beggar's Holiday." Strayhorn traveled with the show during its pre-Broadway tryouts, changing the music and writing new things as revisions required.

"There's no Ellington signature on that cornball stuff," says York, who has conducted and arranged Broadway musicals like "Little Me" and "I Love My Wife," served as musical director for national tours of "The Producers" and "Fosse" and worked with everyone from Bette Midler to the Paul Taylor Dance Company, Judy Collins and Elvin Jones.

"I tried to keep the Ellington in it as much as I could," says York, who rewrote a few bridges and verses, tweaked some melodies and harmonies to fit Wasserman's new lyrics and wrote new

tunes, such as "Fence's Fugue," where the original music couldn't be found.

"Dale's instructions to me were 'Be radical.' He gave me free rein to not bow at the altar of Ellington. Where the original idea didn't work, you need to change it. I tried to be as reverential as I could, but the show came first. " The original "doesn't have a consistent voice. I tried to give it that," adds York, who uses a Duke-ish whole-tone motif to lace everything together.

He recast some swing tunes in more of a funk groove; in his experience, the jazzy swing feel is too relaxed and doesn't work for theater. The funk propulsion "gives the numbers a push and theatricality," York says. "The choreography can be more dramatic."

The show's signature song, "In Between," aptly pegs what "Beggar's Holiday" is about, says York, who arranged the music for septet (violin doubling on viola, cello, a reed player and a rhythm section). "It's between reality and dream, between real feeling and faux feeling, cynicism and earnestness.

"It has slapstick, but underlying it is a deep message about how we're all crooks in one way or another. That comes from the original 'Beggar's Opera. ' We are living in cynical times. Dale really put some bite into it. It's not as severe as 'Threepenny Opera,' but he gets his licks in."

Beggar's Holiday: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday; 8 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday through Oct. 10 at Marin Theatre Company, 397 Miller Ave., Mill Valley. Tickets: \$28-\$46. (415) 388-5208, www.marintheatre.org.

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