

You know the songs, but do you know the story of Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons? The Rock and Roll Hall of Famers became one of the greatest successes in pop music history, but the story behind the scenes has never been told until now. Don't miss the show *The New York Times* calls "Too good to be true!" In Segerstrom Hall November 13–December 1.



Revealing the Jersey Boys

BY SHERYL FLATOW

The ecstatic roar occurs for the first time some 42 minutes into *Jersey Boys*, the wildly popular, Tony® Award-winning musical inspired by the story of Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons. Prior to that eruption, the audience has been getting to know the four individuals who would join together to form one of the leading pop groups of the 1960s: Valli, Bob Gaudio, Nick Massi and Tommy DeVito. They've also been treated to more than a dozen songs, some well-known, but none from The Four Seasons' extensive catalogue of hits.

So when Gaudio writes the words and music for a song with a decidedly different sound, and the group launches into "Sherry," the audience cannot contain its collective joy. That euphoric response, which occurs several times more during the show, is surprisingly moving. It's not simply a matter of baby boomers in the audience nostalgically acknowledging their youth. It's that "Sherry" and other numbers—including "Big Girls Don't Cry," "Walk Like a Man," "December, 1963," "Let's Hang On," "Bye Bye Baby," "C'mon Marianne" and "Can't Take My Eyes off You"—are wrapped into a compelling, superbly crafted, warts-and-all book by Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice, splendidly directed by Des McAnuff, which makes the audience care about these blue-collar Jersey boys and their rocky road to the top. By the time they perform "Sherry,"



“By the time they perform ‘Sherry,’ the audience has come to accept these four characters as the real Four Seasons.”

the audience has come to accept these four characters as the real Four Seasons; their cheers are as much for the group’s new-found success as they are for the sheer delight in hearing “Frankie Valli” let loose with his distinctive falsetto on the quartet’s first No. 1 hit.

“To go that long until ‘Sherry’ hits was pretty daring, and I have to credit Des, Marshall and Rick for taking that risk,” says Gaudio, who composed most of the songs, often with lyrics by Bob Crewe. “It’s like they pull back a slingshot very slowly, and then when you get to ‘Sherry,’ it’s just, ‘Bam!’”

For years, Gaudio had entertained the notion of bringing the music of The Four Seasons to Broadway. In 2001, he composed the score for a West End production of *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which rekindled thoughts of a show built around The Four Seasons music. He and Valli eventually met

with Brickman and Elice. “I made the first move to get into the theater,” says Gaudio, “but it was Rick, in particular, who really carried the ball.”

Brickman, who is perhaps best known as co-author of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, did not initially share Elice’s enthusiasm. “It wasn’t easy for Rick to get Marshall involved in the show,” says Gaudio. “Marshall is an accomplished musician and a West Side snob. He knew a couple of our songs and thought they were pop fluff. One day he ran into Itzhak Perlman, who is a friend of his, and Itzhak asked him what he was working on. Marshall said, ‘I’m dabbling with the idea of doing a musical.’ He was reluctant to say what it was, and Itzhak kept pumping him. Finally Marshall said, ‘A group called The Four Seasons.’ And Itzhak started singing our songs. So Marshall thought, ‘I better pay a little more attention.’ He looked over our music, and

he freaked. He said, ‘There are chords in here I can’t even label. This music is so much more involved than I ever thought.’ He was hooked.”

The story is told from the perspectives of all four members of the original group. “Each guy had an opportunity to give his take on the story of The Four Seasons,” says Valli. “We’d all decided that if there was going to be a show, we were going to have to reveal a lot of things that were kind of swept under the carpet. It could not be a made-up story—the show certainly never would have had the legs that it’s had. Revealing portions of your life that are private is not easy, and you have to think about how it affects other people. We really had to wrestle with some things. For years there were factions of The Four Seasons that didn’t speak to each other.”

That was not the case for Valli and Gaudio, who formed an enduring business

continued on page 22



partnership separate from the rest of the group, based on just a handshake. Forty-five years ago, they agreed to split all future earnings down the middle regardless of where their careers took them. Gaudio would go on to become a much sought-after producer and arranger, while Valli developed a solo career. “The deal came about because Gaudio and I were really the guys that did the legwork,” says Valli. “We wanted success so bad, so we were out there knocking on doors. It wasn’t four guys going into New York every day trying to make an appointment or place a record. It was Gaudio and I.”

Between 1962 and 1967, The Four Seasons had 13 top-10 hits. Despite their enormous popularity, they didn’t have the cachet of contemporary bands like The Beatles, The Beach Boys and The Rolling Stones. “That has so worked to our benefit,” says Gaudio. “Had we been The Beatles

or The Beach Boys, the element of surprise would have been gone and the show would not be nearly as effective.”

It still clearly bothers Valli and Gaudio that The Four Seasons didn’t receive much respect during their heyday. “Our success was against all odds,” says Valli. “We were such a low-profile musical entity. We were never really embraced by the industry, and we weren’t with a major record company until much later.”

“Because people never paid attention, they really don’t have a clue what the musical content is,” says Gaudio. “There are a lot of classical undertones and overtones in my music that people never picked up on because of the pop sound. But if you’re a musician, try to play the chords: You’ll learn that it takes some practice. We were never glamour boys. We never got that kind of publicity. Nobody really cared. We were only as good as our last record. No one even

considered that we might have a following of any consequence. Now fans are coming out of the closet. But who knew? There’s always been a small fan club. They’ve never been aggressive, but they’ve always been around. And now they feel vindicated. It’s such a kick to see those people having so much fun with the show.”

Valli and Gaudio are also reveling in the success of *Jersey Boys*; Gaudio admits he sometimes stands outside the theater just to hear what people are saying. And he got to meet one of his admirers when Perlman came to see the show. “I’m such a fan of his, and there he was going on and on,” says Gaudio. “It was amazing. You never know who you’re going to touch. That someone who is in a whole other league has been inspired by something we’ve done is incredibly gratifying.”

continued on page 24

Bob Gaudio and Frankie Valli have purposely avoided offering advice to the various actors who play them. “I don’t have a clue what I was all about when I was a kid,” says Gaudio.

“We spend a lifetime here on earth, and hardly any of us know the way we walk or the way we talk, or how we come off to anybody else,” says Valli.

Gaudio is played in this production by Erich Bergen. “Bob made it easy on me,” says Bergen. “He was very kind and treated me like everyone else. Our director told us numerous times that they hired us because we brought something different to the roles, and that’s what they wanted. We’re playing four distinct characters. And the only one the public knew before this show was Frankie Valli. The rest of us had it easy. The main thing for me is that Bob was never comfortable in the spotlight, and I am. So I have to really tone it down. There were certain things I wanted to put in, like his smile. Frankly, the audience doesn’t know how he smiles. But I thought it was important to find things that were very much like him.”

Valli is portrayed by Christopher Kale Jones. “If you just sing those notes, you’re going to sound a little bit like Frankie, simply because not a lot of people do that falsetto,” says Jones. “I’ve attempted to imitate Frankie to the degree that I’m capable, without sacrificing performance. I had a great conversation with him about it when we were opening in San Francisco, and he’s been very understanding. One thing I

noticed is that Frankie’s kind of constrained physically. He was never a flamboyant performer. For him, it was very much about the voice and the music and interpreting the song, but it wasn’t about a lot of show.

And I find that to be true in the brief encounters I’ve had with him. So I try to honor that within the performance.”

Both actors marvel at their good fortune to be in a show that receives such an astonishing audience response. “It’s spine-tingling,” says Bergen. “If there’s such a thing as magic, this is it. I’m a child of the theater. I’m most comfortable when I’m onstage, and I’ve done a lot of shows. But I’ve never experienced an audience reaction like this, and I don’t think I ever will again.”

Arts journalist Sheryl Flatow is a frequent contributor to Performing Artscenter publications.

SEGERSTROM HALL

Dates: November 13–December 1, 2007

Tickets: \$83.25–\$28.25

Sponsored by:

Cox Communications

California Bank & Trust