

ON THE RECORD: Time After Time/Dodsworth

By Steven Suskin

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TIME AFTER TIME / DODSWORTH [Original Cast OC 6128]

A veteran Broadway composer sent me a copy of Time after Time/Dodsworth. The accompanying note — a post-it, actually — said not that it was the greatest thing he'd heard in years, but simply that he thought I might find it interesting. Interesting it is indeed, and thanks for the recommendation.

This CD is more or less a backer's audition of two musicals. Not so new, apparently; Dodsworth was first produced in 1995, at Casa Manana in Fort Worth, with Hal Linden and Dee Hoty in the leads. Time after Time is newer, dating back to 2002 or so. On the occasion of a 2004 benefit concert in Marion, MA, composer Jeffrey Saver and lyricist Steven Cole assembled a quartet of top-flight musical comedy types and presented abridged versions of both musicals. Said concert was duly recorded and has now been released on Original Cast Records.

Both scores are promising, in different ways. One might raise some questions as to the strengths and weaknesses of these musicals-in progress, but the CD demonstrates that both are viable. This is nothing to be taken for granted; too many scores for proposed musicals today leave you wondering "why would anybody want to see this?" The bottom line in the case of Dodsworth and Time after Time is: Saver can write music that is melodic, thoughtful and intriguing, and Cole writes with wit and feeling. Along with generally upbeat and clever comedy numbers, the boys — most importantly — come through with several arresting songs that soar.

Dodsworth has an old-fashioned air about it, and one that might ultimately cause problems. I remember pondering the prospects of Sidney Howard's 1934 play (from Sinclair Lewis' 1929 novel), and thinking it might well make an interesting musical. But this was back in the olden days of B.C. (That is, before Chorus Line and Chicago). Good old Sam Dodsworth had a wife and couldn't keep her. He takes up with a sympathetic and decent divorcee, at which point his straying wife decides to come back. Should he return to the woman who doesn't deserve him (to whom he is married)? Or should he stay with the good woman (who loves him)? This was at a time when American society looked at divorce as a terrible, scandalous thing. (Yes, there was such a time, and not so long ago.) The strength of "Dodsworth," on page and stage and screen, was that

they had audiences pulling for Sam to stay with the good woman he was not married to. For today's audience, this is not such a shattering issue. One has to wonder if Sam Dodsworth's dilemma is strong enough to support a modern, dramatic musical, even one with a worthy score.

Time after Time is something else again. Based on the novel by Karl Alexander, it places H. G. Wells in modern-day New York, chasing Jack the Ripper. The idea is attractive and, from the tab version presented on the CD, seems workable. The score, as with the other Saver-Cole musical, has impressive peaks. This sampler CD, which features eight of the songs, leaves us wanting more.

The performers Saver and Cole lined up for their concert include Judy Blazer and Liz Callaway, and of course everything they sing (alone and together) sounds wonderful. How could it not? They are joined by Christian Borle and Walter Charles. Charles is a bit hamstrung by his roles; given the four-person cast, someone has to sing both the middle-aged Sam Dodsworth and the considerably younger Jack the Ripper. Charles is not particularly right for either role, but he nevertheless acquits himself well. Borle is the surprise here. We know from *Elegies* and *Spamalot* that he is a versatile singing actor with a fine comic streak. Here he portrays a young and very British H. G. Wells, transported by time machine to 2006 Manhattan, and Borle does impressively well; he is not, it turns out, simply a (very funny) character comedian.

And so we have "new songs from new musicals" by Jeffrey Saver and Stephen Cole. It is encouraging to find "new" writers like this working in the contemporary musical theatre. It is at the same time discouraging to realize that they have been doing so for at least a decade, with no Broadway activity to their credit. (Saver is a musical director, presently at Chicago; Cole has written at least nine musicals that have been produced here and there, though not on Broadway.) This do-it-yourself backer's audition-of-a-CD breezily accomplishes its mission, which is to say it serves as an overdue introduction to a team we want to hear more from.

—Steven Suskin, author of the forthcoming "Second Act Trouble" [Applause Books], "A Must See! Brilliant Broadway Artwork," the "Broadway Yearbook" series, "Show Tunes," and the "Opening Night on Broadway" books. He can be reached by e-mail at Ssuskin@aol.com.