

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### MARTI PELLOW

It's always fascinating to venture into the actors' inner sanctum and eavesdrop on a production in rehearsal. Today, *Witches of Eastwick* director Nikolai Foster is casting his all-seeing eye over one of the show's set-pieces, when the good people of Eastwick learn the identity of the new arrival Darryl van Horne is the name on everybody's lips and Darryl himself, aka Marti Pellow, is sitting on the sidelines, leaning forward with eager attentiveness as if he doesn't want to miss a second of what Foster is saying or what his colleagues are doing. It's obvious that Marti is having a whale of a time and that he's taken to the musical theatre with the same aplomb that shot him and his partners in *Wet Wet Wet* to the top of the charts and which has helped him carve out a career as an acclaimed songwriter and solo artist.

Afterwards, Marti, a lean, incisive, charismatic presence, unwinds from the rigours of rehearsal. But there is nothing lethargic about Marti Pellow. He is expressive, he is demonstrative, he pounces on questions and shakes answers out of them, like a dog with a favourite toy. Marti reflects on the unexpected twist to his career that has established him as a leading man in the musical theatre.

"I've only ever done one musical before, which was *Chicago*, and I've spent the last five years looking for something equally special. Then I came across *The Witches of Eastwick* and I went to see a production in Washington and I was very excited by it. The show was accessible and uplifting. To play Darryl is a real challenge and he has wholly engaged my imagination. He suddenly appears in this 1950s suburban town of white picket fences and he completely disturbs it."

Marti is not the first major recording artist to make the cross-over into the musical theatre and transform himself from performer into actor. It's been a relatively painless transition, says Marti.

"When you're a lyricist, you try to inhabit the song as you write it as if you were a character. All the information you need to put over a song properly and in character is in the lyric. Darryl comes into the lives of these three women and although he seduces each of them, part of the seduction is providing a sounding-board for them and contributing to the process of their empowerment. Alex, for instance, has always believed that she's overweight. Her experience with Darryl helps her realise that she may be voluptuous but she's also beautiful."

Like Darryl, Marti oozes dangerous charm. Where is the source of his power to seduce entire audiences?

"My mother and father are both bonnie people and to love is part of who I am. I'm a romantic and I love great wordsmiths. I never expected to get involved in musicals. It only happened when I did a gig at the Royal Albert Hall and Ruthie Henshall was in the audience. I saw her after the show and she encouraged me to think about doing a musical. Then the *Chicago* people approached me. I thought about the O. J. Simpson case and how it is possible that people can get away with murder. The whole subject resonated with me and since I've known a lot of sleazy lawyers in my time, playing Billy Flynn on Broadway and in the West End was not too difficult."

For the immediate future, Marti has committed himself to a lengthy association with *The Witches of Eastwick* but in the longer term, he's already thinking about the next musical.

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# THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

A HELL OF A MUSICAL

## Marti Pellow/page 2

"I love *Nine*, the musical based on Fellini's 8 and 1/2. I especially love the darker aspects of such pieces. Rodgers and Hammerstein' wrote some beautiful songs but their work is not for me. As the years pass and the older you get, you learn to keep your eyes and your ears open and I certainly want to experience all the colours which life can offer you."

As he looks back on his life, Marti is struck by the randomness of it all and by the metamorphosis of Mark McLachlan of Clydebank into Marti Pellow, the idol of millions, singer, songwriter and now actor.

"What would have happened if my elder brother, who was supposed to be looking after me, hadn't taken me with him to see Bowie as Ziggy Stardust? Would I still have found out that this what I wanted to do? My father was a labourer and he earned his living digging in all weathers. If that was the reality, I wanted the make believe."

Not that Marti was an innocent. He and his colleagues in the band that became known as Wet Wet Wet knew that they were in for the long haul and took the appropriate action.

"We were canny lads. Even at the age of seventeen or eighteen, we knew we should set up our own publishing company. There was a sense of dedication to what we were doing and that unity gave us our strength. I'm now forty-three" he continues, "and I'm still searching for new things to do, things that will take me outside my comfort zone, things like being on stage in a musical."

There have been unspecified times, Marti admits, "when my enthusiasm has outweighed my talent" yet you feel that Marti Pellow is always open to suggestions. There was a significant meeting with the great Robert de Niro, for example.

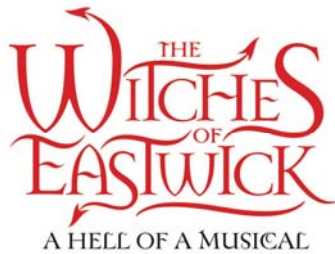
"He'd seen my face on a poster for the Broadway run of *Chicago* and he'd asked to meet me." explains Marti. "I read for a part in *The Good Shepherd*, the film he was directing. I didn't get it but this is all part of what I want to do. It's all about not being afraid to come a cropper."

Despite all his achievements in music, in the theatre and - who knows? - on the silver screen, Marti remains an essentially modest chap. He's looking forward to a lengthy stint at the Edinburgh Playhouse, appearing in *The Witches of Eastwick* over Christmas and New Year. No doubt the good people of Auld Reekie will turn out in their droves, boosted by a contingent of family and friends making the journey across Scotland from Clydebank.

"Of course, I'm Marti Pellow 24/7 and yet I'm also still Mark McLachlan, an ordinary bloke from Clydebank. It's other people who give you the status. I'm still the same guy who saw David Bowie in concert and decided that this was what I was going to do."

By Al Senter

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### RIA JONES

Given her surname, it comes as no surprise to learn that Ria hails from Wales, from Swansea, to be exact. It's a part of the Principality that has produced an apparently endless stream of world class actors, singers and performers- from Richard Burton to Anthony Hopkins to Michael Sheen, not forgetting Ria's great pal, Catherine Zeta Jones. But the name Ria is much less predictable. What is its origin?

"It's Dutch, I think" says Ria. " My parents got the idea from a couple from Holland they met once. Until Wendy Craig came along in the 1980s in the tv sitcom *Butterflies*, and her character was called Ria, I thought that I was the only one in the country!"

Ria grew up, surrounded by the sound of music. Her mother was an opera singer and her father worked regularly with Tom Jones - yet another of the extensive Jones tribe!

"I attended a local dance school from the age of three and took part in my first concert when I was about the same age. My parents wanted at least one of their children to go into show business. They must have looked at me and said - we'll try her. And I've loved it ever since."

Ria has amassed an impressive list of credits in the musical theatre, both in the West End of London and on tour. She's looking forward to travelling the country with *The Witches of Eastwick* because, unlike some London-based actors, Ria actually enjoys taking to the road.

"I love touring" she enthuses. "To begin with, all the cast are totally committed to the show. They're members of a company because they want to work. And because you're all living and working together, you can grow as a company. I was recently in a production of *High Society* which toured for a year and it was fantastic, the way we bonded together. But when the show came into the West End and we played it at the Shaftesbury Theatre, it became a completely different experience. We only saw each other when we came into the theatre at six o'clock and then we all went straight home after the show."

Ria also has fond memories of taking *Acorn Antiques - The Musical* around the country a few years ago. This was a musical version of the *Crossroads* spoof which Victoria Wood would feature on her television show. Ria was cast in the central role of Mrs Overall, the coffee-making char, originally played by Julie Walters.

"Since I'd grown up, watching her television programmes, it was both exciting and terrifying to be directed by Victoria. She was very particular about the dialogue. If you said 'but' rather than 'and' she'd give you a note reminding you that she'd written 'and' and not 'but; and she'd written it for a reason. 'Don't try too hard to get laughs' she also said to me. Be real and it will be funny and she was absolutely right."

Ria's nerves were further stretched by the prospect of playing Mrs. Overall in one city, in particular.

"I was terrified by the thought of doing the show in Birmingham - Julie Walters' home town." Ria admits. " When I went on, I could sense the audience challenging me to prove myself to them. But the minute I opened my mouth and I said the first line, the audience fell about and I thought to myself Oh God, I'm safe!"

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# THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

A HELL OF A MUSICAL

## Ria Jones/page 2

Ria remembers seeing the original production of *The Witches of Eastwick*. "What sticks in my memory is the power of the ensemble work" and she was very keen to be part of this revival.

"It's a great show for women - three strong women, in particular - and you don't see that in many modern musicals. And the association in people's minds with the film is important too. Audiences, especially outside London, like to know something about a show in advance and I think that the fact that there's a film of *The Witches of Eastwick* helps to sell the stage show."

Ria reflects on Alexandra Spofford, the character she plays in *The Witches of Eastwick*.

"She's got baggage in Eastwick and she feels that she's become stuck in a rut." explains Ria. "She was a chubby child and she hates her body, convinced that she's overweight. She got pregnant with her son at seventeen, got married and got divorced, and in the 1950s it must have taken a brave woman to bring up a child on her own in that kind of community. In a way, she's a bit of a Mother Earth figure and of the three witches, she's the ringleader, she's the boldest. And when she meets Darryl, he completely changes her outlook."

In a business that depends so much on luck, would Ria say she believed in superstitions and in the power of magic?

"It slightly scares me" she admits. "I'd rather not tap into all that. I prefer not to know what's going to happen to me. I do believe in intuition, however, and I do have certain beliefs which you might call superstitions. I never whistle in the dressing-room, for example, nor do I put new shoes on the table. And my Granny once told me that because I have a freckle in the palm of my hand, I'd have been burnt at the stake as a witch."

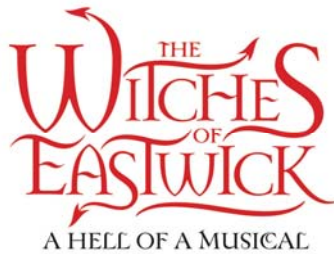
It's absolutely vital that the three actors playing *The Witches* have a good inter-relationship. Had the three of them worked together before - or even met?"

"Rebecca and I were both in a production of *Les Miserables* in Edinburgh but this is the first time I've worked with Poppy. I think that we're finding that we're growing much closer as the weeks of rehearsal go by. In the same way that *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* work, this show celebrates the strength of female friendships."

Looking at her numerous credits, it seems that Ria has been rarely out of work, although she reports that the fallout from the recent spate of reality television shows has made it harder for the regulars of the musical theatre to find work in the West End. But whenever Ria's telephone has stopped ringing, she's returned to the concert platform. She was recently invited to appear before the Danish royal family, for example, and her programme for that gala evening included standards such as *All That Jazz* as well as numbers from *Chess* and *Evita*. Whatever the future holds, Ria is determined "to test myself. I remember reading that Judi Dench only ever takes on a role which she thinks she can't do- and that is exactly what I believe as well."

By Al Senter

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## PRODUCTION NOTES

### REBECCA THORNHILL

It's a case of second time around for Rebecca Thornhill as she gets to know the character of Sukie Rougemont all over again. Rebecca first played Eastwick's ace reporter seven years ago when the original London production transferred to the Prince of Wales from its first home at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

"I did intend to go up for a different witch originally" Rebecca confesses. "But I think I was only hedging my bets and so I decided to stick with Sukie. I loved playing her at the Prince of Wales and it will be interesting to see if there's more to discover in the character."

As a reporter, Sukie works closely with the newspaper's editor, Clyde Gabriel, the man unlucky enough to be married to the redoubtable Felicia, Queen Bee of Eastwick.

"She's sort of having an affair with Clyde" explains Rebecca. "She's very intellectual but she also gets nervous because Sukie's a gentle soul with nothing mean-spirited about her. She's introverted and a bit vague. Like Alex and Jane, she's divorced. They have come together because they have more in common with each other than with the rest of the town."

The witches, says Rebecca, are very powerful but they're not really aware of what they can do until Darryl comes into their lives.

"He opens the door to all three of them, he enables Sukie to have much more self-confidence: he teaches them that they have the power to change within themselves, if they choose to use it."

Like Ria Jones, Rebecca stresses how important it is for the three of them to get on as people.

"It's essential" she argues. "We're three bosom buddies on stage and three great friends of it. I'd worked with Ria in *Les Miserables* and had done a concert with Poppy."

Like Ria and Poppy, Rebecca has concentrated on stage work, with only occasional appearances on television.

"I did have a fabulous part in *Casualty*" she laments. " But it clashed with a theatre job."

*Casualty's* loss is the theatre's gain, however. Several years ago, Rebecca's delicious performance as the hapless Lina Lamont in a stage version of *Singin' in the Rain* deservedly won her an Olivier comedy nomination. In the classic Hollywood musical, Lina is the beautiful but Brooklyn-voiced leading lady of the silent screen. The coming of the talking pictures exposes her grating accent and her career is over.

"I didn't win but I had seen the show that did and it was so funny that I'd cried with laughter. So I was happy that they won the award." says Rebecca generously. "It did make a bit of a difference, however. When I went to audition for *Fosse*, for example, Ann Reinking, who was choreographing the show, congratulated me. Awards and nominations don't make you a better actress, though."

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# THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

A HELL OF A MUSICAL

## Rebecca Thornill/page 2

One of Rebecca's most enjoyable experiences was playing Mrs. Banks in the West End production of *Mary Poppins*.

"She's a lovely character but quite tricky to play. It was my first proper grown-up part, as well. I normally get offered the wacky characters."

Recently Rebecca left the safety of the West End blockbuster musical when she toured in *Showstopper* and she was the only person in the cast.

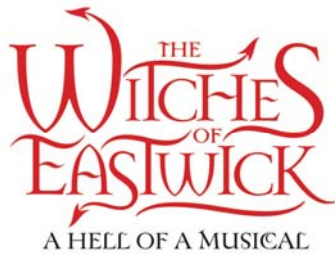
"I had to learn forty-seven pages of dialogue" says Rebecca as if not quite believing it. "It was bloody terrifying. I played a character who dubs for Audrey Hepburn but she has nothing to do with Marni Nixon who famously provided the singing voice for Eliza in *My Fair Lady*. In the play, the character auditions for *The Sound of Music*, dressed as a nun, and she is terrible. Oddly enough, when I auditioned for the part, I was terrible too. But they still asked me to play it. I was on the road for four months, appearing in every size of venue from massive theatres to village halls. I learnt a lot and absolutely loved it but I definitely need company now."

Rebecca is content with her current status and she has no desire, she says, for stardom.

"Why would you want it? Who needs all that pressure?" she asks. "When people went to see *The Sound of Music* with Connie Fisher as Maria, was it the actress they'd come to see or the person off the telly? I prefer to leave the theatre via the Stage Door and not be recognised. That suits me perfectly."

By Al Senter

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## PRODUCTION NOTES

### POPPY TIERNEY

Not unlike the cerebral Jane, the character she plays in *The Witches of Eastwick*, Poppy Tierney did plenty of research before she started work on the show, including acquainting herself with John Updike's original novel.

"I always like to go back to the source of whatever it is I'm doing" reveals Poppy. "The various versions can make very different pieces. of course, but it's still good to get to know how it all began."

It's arguably a character trait which she shares with Jane.

"Jane's a musician but she finds it hard to let go. She's very precise in what she does. To some extent, she's a perfectionist and as a result there is no passion in the music and she finds it hard to be expressive. In a way, Darryl gives her permission to release all this pent-up passion. Jane had a partner but he ran off with another man. So she's unattached and as such she represents a threat to the women of Eastwick. Jane is not backward in coming forward and the relationship with Darryl is so liberating that she turns into a bit of a vamp. Sukie makes men want to take care of her whereas Alex is much more the nurturing type. Jane falls somewhere in-between."

Although Poppy prefers to give a wide berth to anything that smacks of the supernatural, "I'd never do an Ouija board, for example, and I've never felt that I wanted to know the future", she does admit to an interest in what might be called spirituality, although Poppy balks at the word.

"I prefer to see it as a form of energy. When something you wish for comes true or when somebody visualises something and really believes it then it's a matter of intuition, I think."

Poppy has just completed a lengthy run in a touring revival of *Aspects of Love*, the Lloyd Webber musical, where once again she was working with director Nikolai Foster. She has nothing but praise for the young Yorkshireman.

"Nikolai is fantastic" she enthuses. "He allows all the actors to explore the play and he provides a really safe environment where you can suggest things and he can suggest things. It doesn't matter if your ideas don't work: it's just really good to have that freedom."

Dublin is a favourite city of Poppy's. After a visit to the Irish capital, playing Cosette in *Les Miserables*, Poppy gave her Juliet in what was her first Shakespeare and in a production where the Capulets and the Montagues were English and Irish, divided along national lines.

"It was a lovely opportunity to be stretched as an actress" says Poppy. "You can learn such a lot from playing repertory theatre and the audiences really took to me. And it was in Dublin that she gave several concerts with "a real mixture of music- Chicago, Cole Porter, *Les Miserables*, things that work really well together."

As ever, there's lots to look forward to on the road. Poppy intends to do lots of exploring once the show is up and running at each new venue.

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**Poppy Tierney/page 2**

"I love the big cities. I love Manchester for Harvey Nichols and for the nice shopping in general. But I also try and fit in a bit of sight-seeing as well. When I played in Cambridge, for example, I made sure I found time for some punting on the river."

Poppy has put her songwriting on hold while she concentrates on *The Witches of Eastwick* and she is extremely content with her professional life at the moment.

"I love where I'm at, I'm not frustrated with staying in the musical theatre at all." she declares. "If there's a part going at the RSC, the chances are that somebody else will be up for it and not me. But I'm not worried. I don't think that you come into this business to see your name in lights. On the other hand, when you have exposure, you do get paid a lot and I have to admit that it would be nice not to have to audition and to be a little more selective in what you do. As for work on television, it's often a case of not being that good but being right for the part."

Professionally speaking, Poppy has her eye on a number of roles but there is one that stands out.

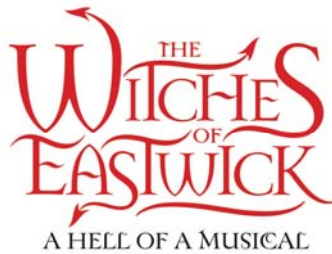
"I want to play Eliza in *My Fair Lady* one day: she's funny, she's sexy and you get to act."

For Poppy, as with so many other young actresses, Dame Judi Dench provides the ideal role model.

"To me, her career is the ultimate career. I'd love people to respect my work in the way that her work is valued. And I'd love to be able to cross over between different sorts of entertainment in the way that she has done. I'd love to appear on Broadway; in fact, I enjoy everything about being creative. I sound quite ambitious, don't I?"

By Al Senter

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## PRODUCTION NOTES

### NIKOLAI FOSTER

Nikolai Foster is one of our fastest-rising young directors. On the theatrical grapevine, his name is mentioned with increasing respect. His work at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds and the Sheffield Crucible has already marked him out as a man to watch and last year's highly successful tour of *Aspects of Love* added further lustre to his growing reputation.

Nikolai, as his first name suggests, has a touch of Mother Russia in his genes, although he is vague about the precise status of his Russian ancestors. His maternal grandparents were Finnish but of Russian extraction and Nikolai was born in Copenhagen which strictly speaking would appear to make him a Dane. However, growing up in the Dales and his accent, which has a hint of Alan Bennett or David Hockney, would surely qualify him as an adopted Yorkshireman.

After what sounds like a solitary boyhood "I had a toy theatre and I used to ride horses across the Dales", Nikolai moved to London to study at the prestigious Drama Centre. But it did not turn out quite as expected.

"Although I was ostensibly doing the acting course, I was much more interested in the lighting, the costume, the music- everything, in fact, apart from the acting" laughs Nikolai. "Eventually the Principal, Christopher Fettes, said to me one day - You don't want to be an actor, do you?"

Nikolai soon realised that his real talent lay in directing and at the tender age of twenty-two, he found himself in charge of a production of the Broadway classic, *A Chorus Line*. He has seldom put a foot wrong ever since.

"You don't become cocksure but you do learn to trust yourself more" says Nikolai. "I'm not sure if there's really a common theme running through the work I do- perhaps there's something about an individual struggling against an unsympathetic world. Directing a musical when you're so young is a question of learning from your mistakes. It's a process of climbing up a tree, falling, picking yourself up and starting to climb again."

Nikolai describes himself as a "passionate but a very private person. I think you have to be passionate when you're putting on a show." At twenty-eight, he observes that he's learning and being challenged all the time. fresh from directing a well-received production of *London Assurance*, Boucicault's evergreen farce "I tried to find the right style to match the bluff bluster of a great Victorian comedy", the brain, says Nikolai, is now "firing on all cylinders."

Nikolai has decided to shift the setting of *The Witches of Eastwick* from the 1960s, when the Updike novel was set, to the preceding decade. Why?

"I think that the 1960s still conjure up flower power and revolution for most people and i wanted to get back to an idyllic, almost an innocent world, which is fractured by a murder and then by a suicide. John {Dempsey} and Dana {Rowe} have been fantastic; three numbers have gone from the first London production and two new ones have been added to the score."

What are the themes of the show?

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# THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

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## Nikolai Foster/page 2

"You could give it a feminist reading, despite the touch of misogyny in the source novel. Darryl arrives in Eastwick and tells the three women that they need him. What he does is to make them believe in themselves and once they have realised this, they banish him and soar quite independently."

Nikolai has enjoyed a long term association with the West Yorkshire Playhouse where he will return once his two current preoccupations, *The Witches of Eastwick* and *All The Fun of the Fair* are safely on the road. The latter is a new show by David Essex that reflects something of his own gypsy background and continues the relationship with Nikolai that first blossomed last year when Essex starred in *Aspects of Love*. At the time of writing, non-stop Nikolai was steeling himself for the awkward commute between the Theatre Royal, Norwich and the Churchill Theatre, Bromley, respective first staging-posts for each production.

"It's raw, gritty and dirty and it's so funny that it will make you cry with laughter" promises Nikolai, referring to the Essex show.

Surprisingly, Nikolai has yet to make a proper mark on the London theatre and he is apparently happy to remain best known outside the capital.

"I quietly get on with it" he says. "I've always tried to keep out of the set in and around the National Theatre Studio. I can't bear networking and I don't want to spend my time, talking about what I'm about to do, stroking egos all the time. It's very competitive for directors but I don't do what I do for my peers. I do what I do for the audience."

By Al Senter

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