

t h e a t e r

# Springer fever

Trust a team of gay men to dazzle London with a stylish little romp called *Jerry Springer—the Opera* By Michael Giltz



Hot stuff: Michael Brandon as Jerry Springer

Londoners may have jeered magician David Blaine as he dangled in his box over the Thames, but they do take some American hucksters to their hearts. Case in point: *Jerry Springer—the Opera*. Opening in the West End this month after a smash run at the National Theatre, the rude, crude, but sophisticated and sweet musical has left audiences helpless with laughter and critics outdoing each other with superlatives.

From the early opening line "My mother used to be my dad!" and the repeated refrain "Dip me in chocolate and feed me to the lesbians. This is my Jerry Springer moment!" the show never lets up. Arias about men who want to poo in their pants and women who want to pole-dance climax in the first act with a finale of tap-dancing Ku Klux Klansmen that rivals *The Producers* in showstopping audacity.

How do they top it in the second act? Easily. Actor David Bedella—who plays Satan throughout as well as a warm-up comic in the first act—remembers first seeing his big second-act number.

"They gave me my duet with Jesus, and that was all they had told me," says Bedella, who moved to London so his partner could become the pastor of a London Metropolitan Community church. (They met in a touring production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, appropriately enough.)

"And what it ended up being was me singing 'Fuck you' the entire time while he was singing 'Talk to the stigmata,'" Bedella adds. "That was the first time I knew in rehearsal when I knew it was going to be pretty fun."

Critics agreed. *The Observer* dubbed it "the most explosive theatrical event for years." And *The New York Times* declared it "the most sought-after show

in the world." It's the first original musical ever to transfer to the West End from the National, and rumors are flying that it will come to Broadway in the fall of 2004, possibly in the theater where *The Phantom of the Opera* may end its run next summer.

But should you bring your granny?

"I don't think it's at all blasphemous," says Richard Thomas, who got his "Eureka!" moment about creating the show when watching TV's *Jerry Springer* and realizing the scenes of everyone yelling at each other were just like moments from operas when everyone is singing and you can't understand a word they're saying.

"Even the bit when Jesus says, 'Actually, I'm a bit gay.' The point is, Jesus is supposed to embrace all aspects of mankind, and it's really accurate to say that 'actually, I'm a bit gay,'" laughs Thomas, who wrote the music and cowrote the book and lyrics with director Stewart Lee. "And it's a good gag. The stigmata and 'Actually, I'm a bit gay' were two very good days at the office."

*Jerry Springer—the Opera* started as a half-hour routine Thomas performed called *How to Write an Opera*. Lee, who'd crossed paths with Thomas before doing comedy and working in various shows on television, knew it would work from the start.

"There were two songs he sang on his own," says Lee, who never saw a live musical or opera his entire life until after Thomas talked him into directing *Springer*. "The pole-dancing song 'I Just Want to Dance' and the song 'I Just Want to Shit My Pants,' which is sung by a man who likes to dress up as a baby. They were both funny, but they were really moving as well, and you really felt for the people as well."

First they did it as a lark, getting the cast members to perform for free. Lee realized it was growing out of all proportion when an ex-girlfriend in New York was wrapping up a package with newspaper and saw an article about it with his face pictured. Then a bigger version played the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, a breeding ground for new shows. That led to the unlikely transfer to the posh National Theatre and now a West End debut.

"I never dreamt I'd do Broadway," says Thomas, whose partner of four years is a ballet dancer. "So I'm in a state beyond dreams, really."

The only nightmare was the first ▶



time the real Jerry Springer came to see it. The creators never actually acquired the rights to his name and likeness, and while Springer has been polite, the production company that owns the TV show *Jerry Springer* has been making runnings at each step of the show's increasing success. (Oddly, Springer had already been approached about another musical based on his show after he appeared in *The Rocky Horror Show*.)

"He was very charming," says Thomas. "When we met Jerry, we met him before he saw the show, and they said whatever you do, don't tell Jerry he gets shot at the end of the first half. So the first thing Jerry says is, 'So I get killed in the show?'"

Naughty boys:  
co-creators  
Stewart Lee  
(standing) and  
Richard  
Thomas



I said, 'Look, Jerry, you come out of the show really well, but you do come out a bit dead.' He was cool with it.

"If I said to you it was not entirely resolved.... Jerry has said in print that he loves it and endorses it," says Thomas. "But the truth is, Studios USA claims to own the show and the format. If they decide they want to, they can kick up a fuss. But we've got really good producers, so they're ready for a battle. Jerry's never asked for a piece of it at all. But Studios USA, I'm not sure. There were some negotiations at some point, but I try and keep out of that because I don't really fully understand it. I don't think they can stop the show, but I don't know. Where there's a hit, there's a writ." ■

*Gillz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.*