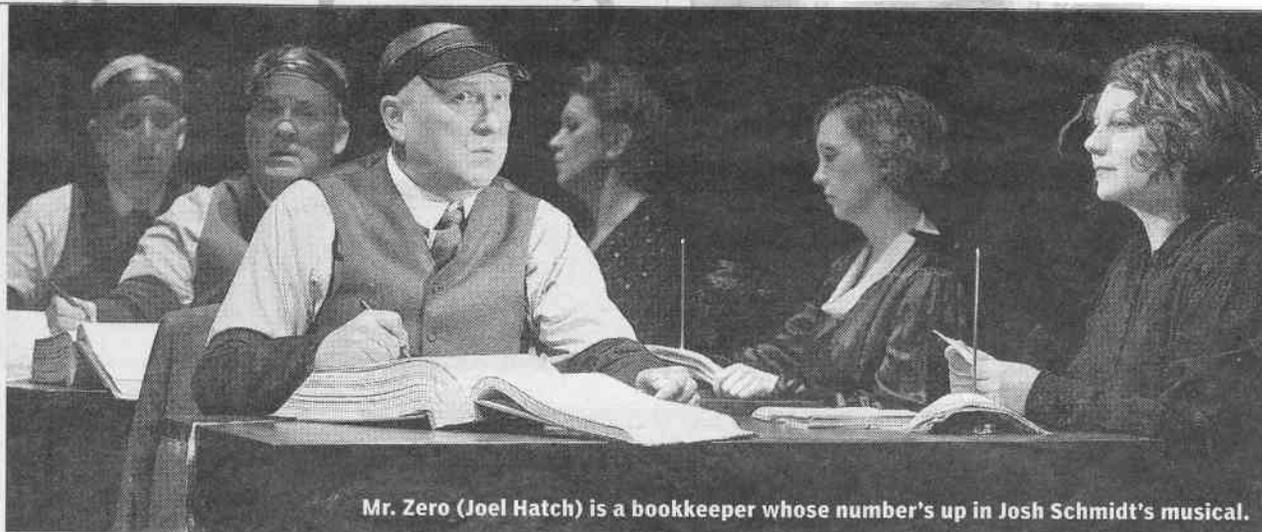


AN EASY SELL

'Adding Machine' clicks Off-Broadway

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

3/16/08



Mr. Zero (Joel Hatch) is a bookkeeper whose number's up in Josh Schmidt's musical.

The tally of shows composer Josh Schmidt has written equals exactly one: the acclaimed "Adding Machine," a transplant from Chicago that opened Feb. 25 at the Minetta Lane Theatre. But he's already determined to smash the machinery of Broadway to create something new.

"If I was satisfied that musical theater was just fine and dandy as it was, I probably would not have accepted the commission [to write "Adding Machine"] because I would have nothing to add to the discussion," insists Schmidt, 31, a native of Milwaukee who lives in Park Slope with his wife. "If we want to consider the form still alive, somebody's got to at least try. And I'm not even trying that hard. I'm just doing what the play is dictating me to do."

Based on the boldly experimental 1923 play by Elmer Rice, "Adding Machine" is a dark chamber opera à la "Sweeney Todd"

that tells the story of Mr. Zero (Joel Hatch), a cog in the wheels of big business, a small man who works in accounting and finds himself suddenly replaced by the innovative device named in the title.

As anonymous as his name, with a shrewish wife (Cyrilla Baer) at home, Zero finally wakes up and strikes back in a moment of violence. Scenes of mechanized work (with echoes of "Metropolis" and Chaplin's "Modern Times") are counterpointed by songs built around the rhythmic jotting down of numbers and scraps of gossip traded at dinner parties. The show moves from Zero's dull job to his dull home life to prison, execution and even the afterlife.

For Hatch, a Chicago actor who came with the project to New York, Zero is a

character he can identify with.

"As an actor, I can relate to failure," laughs Hatch, who in fact works regularly. "That's something I get crystal-clear, as well as the pain and the defensiveness that creates. Zero has a brief moment where he thinks something good is going to come his way. And it doesn't."

While Hatch loves musicals and first performed in New York with "Annie Warbucks" — the sequel to "Annie" — Schmidt has no patience for the conventional. In fact, his co-librettist, Jason Loewith, wasn't even certain that Schmidt had ever seen a traditional musical.

But a lengthy résumé creating innovative sound designs brought Schmidt to everyone's attention as a rising talent. He

The play's
'a complex,
strong black cup
of coffee.'

was commissioned by the Windy City's Next Theater Company to create a music theater piece around Rice's play.

"To be honest, when you're 27 and someone says they want you to write an opera, and when you're finished, they'll produce it, you say 'Yes!'" says Schmidt. "So I actually agreed without reading the play first. Then I read it. It's a very deeply thought, deeply felt, powerfully written piece of literature. It's a complex, strong black cup of coffee."

For Hatch, unlike the character he plays, his work couldn't be more satisfying.

"I love the genre of musicals," says Hatch. "I've done a lot of musicals. And I feel [this show] is an opportunity to expand the medium."

"Musicals don't just have to be about pretty people singing pretty songs. There can be something that hits people at a deeper level." ♦