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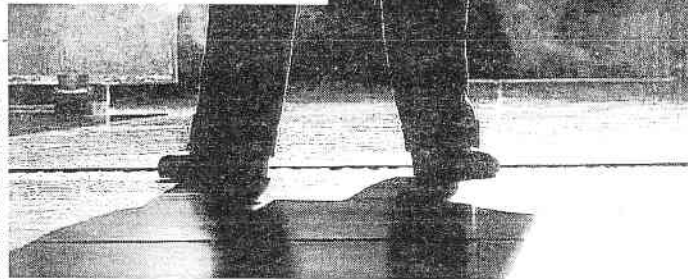
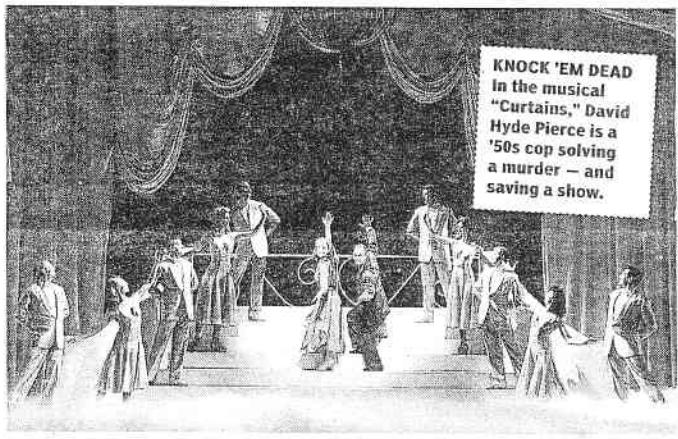
Three cheers for the men of 'Frasier,' together again (sort of) on stage. What would Freud say? BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Frasier" is the only sitcom to win the Best Comedy Emmy five years in a row. And its 11-year run, from 1993 to 2004, set all sorts of other records, making the "Cheers" spinoff one of the most acclaimed and successful shows in TV history. Now, its stars are back in the spotlight in a trio of New York theater productions.

David Hyde Pierce (the former Niles Crane) is the lead in "Curtains," the new comedy-mystery musical from the team behind "Cabaret" and "Chicago." John Mahoney (cranky Crane patriarch Martin) stars in the first Broadway revival of Craig Lucas's early '90s romantic drama "Prelude to a Kiss." And "Frasier" star Kelsey Grammer slides into Henry Higgins' loafers for staged concert readings of "My Fair Lady" at Lincoln Center.

Is it a testament to the high caliber of the "Frasier" cast, we asked Hyde Pierce?

"It's a testament to the low standards of Broadway," he immediately replies. Niles couldn't have put it more wryly.



The river of Niles

Actor David Hyde Pierce has already appeared on Broadway in the Tony-winning musical "Spamalot." He has performed with the legendary Uta Hagen. He has set a record for consecutive Emmy nominations for his performance as Niles Crane on the smash hit "Frasier."

But remind him that he's playing the lead role in "Curtains," a musical from John Kander & Fred Ebb (who died in 2004) at the AJ Hirschfeld Theatre, and he admits it does something to him.

"It makes me a little *tingly* when you say those words," says Hyde Pierce, sitting backstage with a gun by his side. (He plays a policeman in the show.) "I'm having so much fun I'm not thinking about it."

"Curtains" opened in Los Angeles last summer to solid reviews and will be one of the last, if not the last, new Broadway works from the team that did "Cabaret," "Chicago" and "Kiss of the Spider Woman." (After Ebb passed away, Kander collaborated with book writer and lyricist Rupert Holmes on some songs; Kander & Ebb had started other shows, too.)

The show bows on March 22.

But "Curtains" is something a little different — it's a droll musical comedy murder mystery set in 1959 and co-starring Debra Monk, Karen Ziemba and "Frasier" regular Edward Hibbert. Hyde Pierce plays Cioffi, a police lieutenant who is a very good detective but would really love to be an actor. When the untalented leading lady of a stage production is murdered, Cioffi finds himself trying to solve the crime and fix the book of the troubled show before it moves to Broadway.

It's intended as a lark, though, of course, this is a Kander & Ebb show.

"It has some dark underbelly to it, which pops up or rolls over occasionally," says the 47-year-old Emmy winner. "I guess I don't know what the right image is for 'dark underbelly' ... but it exposes itself periodically. However, this is not 'Cabaret' in its darkness."

Naturally, it's easy to see this as a valentine to the theater for Kander & Ebb, two of that world's most acclaimed talents.

"That's not wrong," says Hyde Pierce, who is as droll — but more appealing —

in person than the buttoned-up Niles.

"But if this were the beginning of John Kander's career and he wrote a valentine to the theater, that would be one thing. But at this stage, where Kander has done so much and experienced so much, saying the same thing means something completely different. That's what I love about this show."

"This is a really Niles Crane-like, elitish observation, but Bach's 'Goldberg Variations' starts out with a very simple tune and then it goes through variation after variation with all this incredible complexity. And at the very end, you hear the tune again, just like it was at the beginning, except *everything* has changed."

A keyboard in his dressing room is a reminder that until he was halfway through

college, Hyde Pierce believed he would be a classical pianist. He grew up in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. (about a three-hour drive from the city), following a calling to perform that his father felt he never could.

"My dad did community theater before I was ever around," says Hyde Pierce. "He was an insurance agent who wanted to be an actor. Friends of my mom and dad came to the show [recently] and said to me afterward, 'You're your father.' I have a picture of my dad at about the time this show takes place in the '50s. He's with his two sisters and his mom and he's in a suit very similar to the suit I wear in the show."

"I think of him a lot. The idea of this guy who is in a certain profession but what he always wanted to do was act — that's him."

CRANE GANG

A hymn to him, hmm?

The last time Kelsey Grammer came to New York, it was in an ill-starred production.

"I had a short-lived run on Broadway with 'Macbeth,' which I really, really enjoyed," says Grammer of the 2000 production that ran less than three weeks, including previews.

He pauses with exquisite timing before adding, "Others enjoyed it less."

And while Grammer, 52, says he hopes to tackle that play again before he's too long in the tooth, he's coming back, albeit briefly, with a role that everyone can agree is a perfect fit: the persnickety, demanding, bracingly intelligent Henry Higgins of Lerner and Loewe's "My Fair Lady." A staged concert version at Lincoln Center runs from Wednesday through Saturday and also stars Kelli O'Hara (previously seen in "The Light in the Piazza"), Brian Dennehy and Marni Nixon, who famously dubbed Audrey Hepburn's singing in the Oscar-winning 1964 film version.

"Everyone is kind of expecting me to do the 'understudy performance' of Rex Harrison," says Grammer, a multiple Emmy winner for "Frasier" (and co-star in last year's "X-Men: The Last Stand"). He knows the role has Harrison's indelible stamp. "It doesn't belong to anybody else."

Interestingly, his casting as Dr. Crane had a back story involving a musical: In the



ACCUSTOMED TO HER FACE
Kelli O'Hara and Kelsey Grammer in "My Fair Lady."

early '80s, Grammer was in a workshop production of Stephen Sondheim's "Sunday in the Park With George." But he didn't follow it to Broadway because his "Sunday" co-star Mandy Patinkin gave Grammer's name to an agent seeking someone to tackle a role on TV's "Cheers." Grammer joined the show in 1984, as it was evolving from critical darling to ratings smash.

And soon he'll be returning to TV: This spring, Grammer is filming the pilot for "Action News," a sitcom about a national TV anchor kicked back down to local news. It co-stars Patricia Heaton from "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"It could be a ton of fun. I'm not sure the stars could align any better. [My character] is not really Frasier; people have that longing, I think, probably, to see some of the same histrionics. But he's not such an ef-

fete, this new guy. I think this fella is a little more sure of himself."

Grammer, soon to celebrate his 10th wedding anniversary (another 10 years and he and his wife, Camille, will match Grammer's time playing Frasier on two shows), says digging into the deliciously witty lyrics in songs like "A Hymn to Him" and "I'm an Ordinary Man" brings back memories of his eighth birthday, when he came from New Jersey to New York to see Carol Channing in "Hello, Dolly!" And he even says doing a full-blown musical comedy isn't out of the question for him.

"I've been working on a J. Edgar Hoover musical with Harry Shearer," says Grammer. "We've been kicking this thing around for a decade. It's actually a delightful piece. Boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy gets boy back ... oh, it's a classic '50s-style musical."

Taking success sitting down

In the Broadway revival of Craig Lucas' "Prelude to a Kiss," opening Thursday at the Roundabout, John Mahoney of "Frasier" plays, for the majority of the show, a newlywed bride who finds herself magically trapped in the body of a dying old man. Though worried about the commitment of marriage, now she longs for a second chance.

Mahoney knows all about taking chances. When he was 19, the British-born actor left most of his family behind and moved to America, where he joined the military and became an English teacher. At 37, he found himself editing medical journals, utterly bored and wondering what on earth had happened. So Mahoney

plunged into acting classes for the first time.

"As soon as they cast me in [a local Chicago production of] David Mamet's 'The Water Engine' in the late '70s, I quit my job, which was ... not too smart!" laughs the 66-year-old actor, who made an impression on the big screen in "Moonstruck" (1987), "Say Anything" (1989) and "The American President" (1995) and who'll be seen next in "Dan in Real Life," starring Steve Carell.

"I was making \$75 a week, but I was never happier," he says. "I had to sell all my furniture and records and books and sleep on the floor for a while. I sold all my books and LPs. That killed me."

At Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater company, Mahoney worked with talent like John Malkovich and Gary Sinise. Then came the play "Orphans," a hit that transferred to Off-Broadway and led to his Tony-winning turn in John Guare's "The House of Blue Leaves," film work and ultimately "Frasier," an 11-year-ride (mostly on his character's reclining chair, with Jack Russell terrier Eddie on his lap) that was filled with unexpected riches and critical and popular acclaim.

It reversed Mahoney's fortunes. "I don't have a financial care in the world," he says. "I'm gonna die eventually, so ... I'm gonna have a great time."

That's certainly one theme of "Prelude" — appreciating life while you have it. And Mahoney knows the bittersweet feeling of missing those you love.

"That's one regret I have, that neither one of my parents saw [my success] on stage," he says. "They were very proud of me because I was the first in my family to go to college. But my father was a classical-music fan. I subscribe to the Lyric Opera, and sometimes I'll be on my way to see something and I'll think, 'I wish my dad was here with me.'"



YOU'VE GOT VEIL
John Mahoney, Annie Parise and Alan Tudyk (from l.) in the romantic allegory "Prelude to a Kiss."