

Tuner fest sings for sell-out crowds

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

NEW YORK -- No matter how small, a packed house makes a show feel like an event, and a festival with 30 events may be the story of the season. In a brilliant synergy of marketing, timing and enthusiasm, the second year of the New York Musical Theater Festival has emerged as proof that original tuners -- musicals not based on Disney cartoons or a pop star's greatest hits -- may not be dying after all.

When it shuts on Oct. 2, most of NYMF's staged productions will have done bustling business. As of this writing, 14 of the tuners had at least one sold-out perf, and several had filled their entire runs.

Admittedly, runs last only six nights (though some, like Douglas Carter Beane's terrorist musical "The Big Time," have extended up to 12). And selling out Theater Row's 88-seat Lion Theater, which is hosting six productions, isn't exactly SRO at Radio City. Much has already been made of the festival's role in Gotham. Its very existence suggests a new way to nurture developing talent. "So many of the musicals that come through my office have little room to (receive) development," says Christie Evangelisto, head of musical theater at Playwrights' Horizons. "But now that there's NYMF, there's a really obvious place to send them."

But along with its commitment to artistry, the fest remains a marketplace. Asked to sum up his festival goals, Cornell Christianson, writer of sci-fi comedy "It Came From Beyond," declares, "We're looking for a major commercial production."

He's not the only one. The question is whether this year's offerings will share the fortunes of NYMF hits like "Altar Boyz" or "The Great American Trailer Park Musical." Latter opens its commercial run Sept. 27.

The most positive buzz seems to center on "The Mistress Cycle," a loosely connected group of songs about female infidelity from writers Beth Blatt and Jenny Giering. The show has been bouncing around for years, but its powerful NYMF production feels ready for a transfer. Plus, it's the kind of morally challenging, aesthetically accomplished work that could thrive with auds who don't need to feel good to enjoy musical theater.

Not that there aren't escapist trifles on display. >From its press conference appearances to its nine sold-out perfs, "Plane Crazy" has seemed like a

sure thing. Despite its simplistic songs, this bubbly show about 1960s flight attendants could easily please a party crowd. Given the show's 16 cast members, however, producers may be hard pressed to justify the cost of backing something so slight.

The same problem could haunt "But I'm a Cheerleader," which needs a cast of 20 people to adapt the campy gay-themed film into a "Hairspray"-style coming-of-age tale. With name recognition from the movie, a sell-out was probably inevitable, but the meandering second act and raft of extraneous characters may put a production out of reach.

But all those shows have been talking points for weeks, along with "The Big Time" and "Feeling Electric," which stars Anthony Rapp ("Rent"). More fun will come in seeing if the surprise successes live on.

It could happen for "Yank!," a well-received romp that accompanies the romance of gay WWII soldiers with swing and big-band numbers. And even though it won't open until Sept. 27, "The Shaggs: The Philosophy of the World," based on the true story of an untalented girl group, also holds promise. "Shaggs" producer Laura Penney, who along with partner Jane Abramson also has a hand in "The Mistress Cycle," reports the tuner was fast approaching a sell-out.

"It's great," she remarks, "that a serious song cycle and a fun rock show can both have success in the same place."

Not to mention a light opera based on "The Godfather." In what may be the unlikeliest success story of all, "Don Imbroglia" seems primed, in the words of producer Beth Morrison, to "bring comic opera back to the masses." Tickets are moving so briskly that "Imbroglia" has sold out and added an extra perf, ranking it in the festival's top tier.

Asked if this attention puts more pressure on "Don Imbroglia," which like all fest entries is billed as a showcase, Morrison replies, "We've never really thought of this as a workshop. I really believe in (authors) Matt Boresi and Peter Hilliard, and I want their work to shine as much as possible."

Morrison's attitude signals the double nature of the festival. As Dodger Theatricals' programming head Lauren Mitchell notes, "For some, this is a competition; for others, a learning expedition." For the NYMF shows that want to be seen again, it may have to be both.