

Interview: Husbands of the Stage Musical ‘The First Wives Club’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 18, 2015 - 2:33pm

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CHICAGO – Like the recent movie-to-stage-musical adaptations, “The Producers” and “Young Frankenstein,” Chicago has become the proving ground before a Broadway premiere. The latest is almost a no-brainer, “The First Wives Club,” adapted from the 1996 film that starred Bette Midler, Goldie Hawn and Diane Keaton.

The big news is that the original song writing team of Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland (Holland-Dozier-Holland) have reunited to write new music for the show, adding to their familiar hits “Stop in the Name of Love,” and “Reach Out I’ll Be There.” 22 new songs have been added to “The First Wives Club” stage musical, representing the first new output in years from the famous songwriting trio.



Seán Murphy Cullen, Mike McGowan and Gregg Edelman of the new musical, ‘First Wives Club’

Photo credit: First Wives Club The Musical

Portraying the threesome made famous in the film by Midler, Hawn and Keaton is Broadway baby Faith Prince, with Christine Sherrill and Carmen Cusack. The 2015 Chicago tune-up commences on Tuesday, February 17th, with a Broadway premiere later in the year.

HollywoodChicago.com attended the introductory press conference, and got to talk to the threesome portraying the ex-husbands of the “first wives” in the musical. Seán Murphy Cullen (Morty), Gregg Edelman (Aaron) and Mike McGowan (Bill) talked about the variations on doing a world premiere stage musical.

HollywoodChicago.com: Seán, when formulating your character, what is different in the process between a role in musical theater versus a non musical play? And how did that process go in developing Morty in 'First Wives Club.'?

Seán Murphy Cullen: The first thing I do is read the script, to see what the character says and what your position is in the show. I discovered in this particular play isn't a guy positive show, but there is a sweetness about Morty, and he is a bit ashamed of himself for the kind of life he's leading. And since this is a musical, when you add songs to the play it just heightens the emotion that is already there. Every word is useful, every word has weight, and it all helps in developing a character.

HollywoodChicago.com: Gregg, you had a small role in the film version that became this musical. Were you able to remember anything from the original set that made it into a note for this musical?

Gregg Edelman: The guy who played my role in the film, Stephen Collins, did have a wonderful ease about him, while all the craziness went on around him. I just remembered that the first time I picked up the script for this play. The wonderful oblivious quality that Aaron has in the movie is maintained in the musical, but this version takes it to another level, and in this script I'm raising the comedic stakes.

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, what pitfalls does a company want to avoid when mounting a premiere, and when do you think changes should stop before the first show?

Mike McGowan: This might sound like a cliché, but what we always want to do as actors is be truthful. It's easy when you're doing a new show to try and understand the audience, and work to appeal to them, and then it's easy to lose sight of the story. But what we're negotiating beautifully in this play is understanding what matters in the story, and figuring out a truthful way to figure out relationship problems.

I love changes in the script. It's nice to freeze the show eventually, but that's what this process is about. We'll often rehearse a new version during the day, and then do the old one at the actual show at night. That's the nature of the process, and we have to stay nimble. It's a work in progress.

HollywoodChicago.com: Seán, your name is so quintessentially Irish. How close are you to your Irish heritage? What is most Irish about your acting style?

Cullen: I am Canadian, and the Irish side is about 200 years in the past. The fact that I'm playing a Jewish character is very Irish. [laughs] For some reason, that's what people tend to think I am. I grew up with an appreciation for humor, words and poetry. I guess that could be an Irish heritage thing.



Faith Prince, Christine Sherrill and Carmen Cusack, the Members of the 'First Wives Club'

Photo credit: First Wives Club The Musical

HollywoodChicago.com: Gregg, since you've appeared in all the following musicals, what do you think endears audiences to works like '1776.' 'Cabaret' and 'Cats,' when all of them come from such strange or unlikely sources?

Edelman: I have a friend, who has also been a mentor to me, whose name is Joseph Masteroff – he wrote the original book for the musical 'Cabaret.' He always says the most important decision that a creative will make, when they decide to write a show, is which show are they going to write? It's one thing to come up with an idea that wants to be a musical, but how do you find the idea that creates the proper angle to it, that will make it an event?

Taking the example of ‘1776.’ it’s a suspenseful show about ‘will they ever get enough votes to form a new country?’ Well, we know it happens, but you watch that show and you still wonder if it will happen. It’s that unique theatrical experience that authors are looking for, and I think that’s why those shows that you brought up work well.

Cullen: You were a ‘Cat’?

Endelman: Longest year of my life. I remember I took six months off from the play, and the day I went back I shot out of bed in the morning, and I panicked because I couldn’t remember the make-up design of my character. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, divorce is such a prevalent part of the culture right now. Are you of the opinion that people in general get married too young, before they are able to find out who they are?

McGowan: Yes. [laughs] Seriously, I think people want things to be easy, and nobody wants to work for anything. One of the husbands in the play is willing to work at it, and the payoff becomes huge.

Cullen: Nobody ever does a show about the hard ten years when you’re suddenly bored. [laughs] My parents fought like wild dogs, but they stayed together because of the perceived value of being together.

HollywoodChicago.com: For you all, what is the greatest theater palace and the lowest scum hole you’ve performed in, and give one characteristic of each that made it great and horrible.

Cullen: There were many horrible places I’ve played. Once I was on a stage that was a fire door they had put on sawhorses. You had to careful not to step in the little window. There was another place where there were no bathrooms back stage, so I had to take a pee in a pint glass. That says more about me than the place. [laughs] The best place was Massey Hall in Toronto, a hundred year old beautiful theater, that I played on New Year’s Eve.

Endelman: The best place I’ve played was on the Tony Awards. The places are great, but what is coolest is the people – every great talent you’ve ever admired is just walking around. One year, I shared a dressing room with Matthew Broderick and Christopher Reeve, and Reeve just said ‘Hi, Gregg’ as if he knew me. As for the low points, I have performed in shopping malls.

McGowan: I’ve played the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and it feels like you’re performing in a monument. You work a bit differently in a place like that. I’ve also been fortunate to have played Carnegie Hall. The worst place is a State Fair. I was wearing a costume called ‘Curly Lasagna’ and I worked it when I was 22 years old to play the bills. That’s when you think, ‘I can’t believe my life.’

★ **Go to Page Two for an interview with Executive Producer Elizabeth Williams and Producer Paul Lambert of “First Wives Club The Musical”**

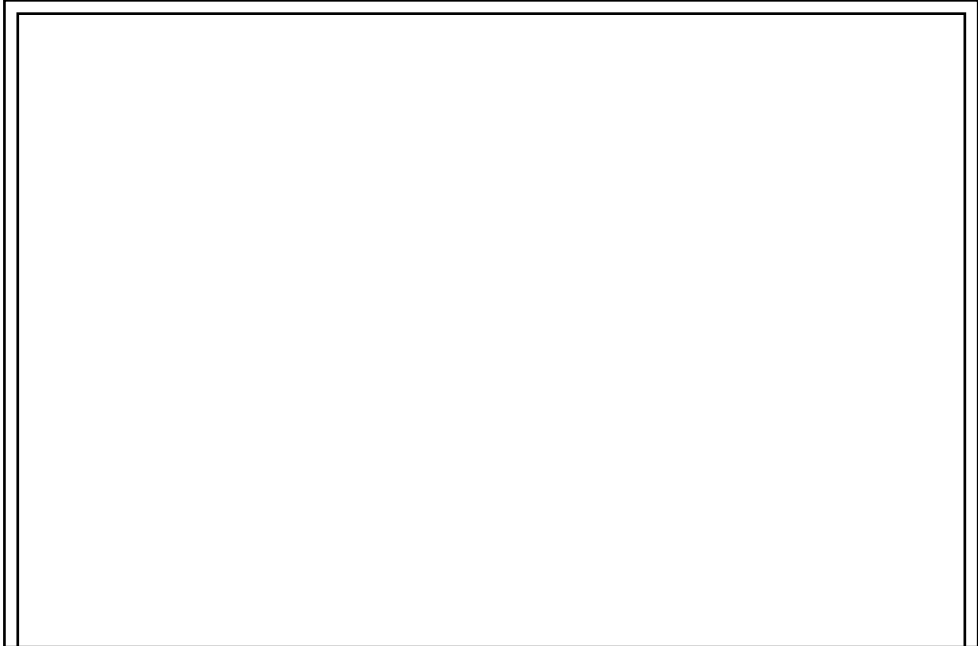
★ **Executive Producer Elizabeth Williams, Producer Paul Lambert of “First Wives Club The Musical”**

Elizabeth Williams, Executive Producer of ‘First Wives Club,’ is practically a Broadway legend. After a career in academia, she cut her teeth in Broadway productions with “The Secret Garden” musical in 1991. After that, she has produced or executive produced over a dozen straight dramas, comedies, original musicals and revivals. “First Wives Club” is her latest production.

Paul Lambert is part of a theater partnership with Jonas Neilson, as they were the producers of the initial 2009 version of “First Wives Club The Musical.” They are now part of the re-engineering of the play, with a new book by famed TV writer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason and music/lyrics by the famed songwriting team of Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin of you and Jonas Neilson as a production team. How did you meet, what were the circumstances of that meeting, and how did it evolve in to a partnership?

Paul Lambert: Jonas was in film and television when I met him, and I was in marketing and advertising. Jonas was in New York City doing an independent film, and we met through mutual friends. We just started talking about the play, which I was just getting involved in. and I told him about Holland-Dozier-Holland being involved. He liked the idea, and had never done theater before. We combined his connections and credentials with my lack of experience [laughs] and we’ve been together since day one.





Paul Lambert, Elizabeth Williams in Chicago for 'First Wives Club'
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Ms. Williams, you've produced seemingly all genre of theater - comedy, drama and musical. What are the challenges that are unique in producing a musical that makes it either easier than the other genres or most difficult?

Elizabeth Williams: Traditionally, none of the new productions are easy, but musicals are particular complex – there are just so many creatives involved. For 'First Wives Club,' we have a great director in Simon Phillips, and he has a great vision to guide the ship, and we're well launched. Musicals are usually regarded as the most difficult genre to get right, it's a miracle when they work.

HollywoodChicago.com: What stage experience when you were younger, either in the audience or working on the stage, convinced you that this would be your career?

Williams: I was an academic when I started out, teaching archeology at Berkley, UCLA and Columbia. But theater was my love, and I was always a happy audience participant. As a young girl, my parents would take me to Broadway shows. As for those shows that would have influence, I remember 'My Fair Lady' and 'Cabaret' – even though I was a bit too young for it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Paul, what ideas did you bring in that you feel helped the transition from the first 2009 version of this musical to the new version today?

Lambert: It's the music obviously, but when Jonas and I talked to the original film producer Sherry Lansing, she told us they went through nine scripts until they got it right. It ended up a comedy, with a bit of a wink, and for a motion picture that works. When you come to theater, it's more about exploring emotions, and cheating husbands combined with divorce has an affect in general on people's lives. So those songs, those ballads, really give us an opportunity to build and expand on the film.

When Elizabeth brought in [book writer] Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, we were able to benefit from her connection the film, her love for these types of characters and her ear for comedy. She was the solution for bringing it together. I think the this musical version of the original story has become more real, emotional and funny. In the audience experience, they won't be prepared on how authentic this really becomes and how it speaks to women.

'First Wives Club, The Musical' runs Tuesdays through Friday at 7:30pm, Saturdays at 2pm & 8pm, and Sundays at 2pm and 7:30pm – through March 29th, 2015, at Ford Center Oriental Theare, 24 W. Randolph in Chicago. [Click here](#) [20] for more information, blackout dates and to purchase tickets. Featuring Faith Prince, Christine Sherrill, Carmen Cusack, Seán Murphy Cullen, Gregg Edelman and Mike McGowan. Book by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason. Music and Lyrics by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland. Directed by Simon Phillips.



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