



Michael Kunze: The Sondheim and Lloyd Webber of Europe

By Ellis Nassour

For someone who became a lawyer and wasn't the least bit interested in music or writing for theater, Michael Kunze made one of the most remarkable and successful turnarounds in the history of show business writing. Now, after countless European hits, he finally makes his Broadway debut with *Dance of the Vampires*, based on the Roman Polanski film spoof, "The Fearless Vampire Killers...", for which he originally wrote book and lyrics with composer Jim Steinman for the acclaimed premiere production in Vienna in 1997.

Things are more than a bit different here.

"We selected [comedic playwright] David Ives to 'Broadwayize' the dialogue," explains Kunze. "I'm completely happy with it, because the other version is my version. However, I'm not able to write in the 'Broadway' style. Being European, I can't write a typically Broadway show. It would never be my desire to copy something that's been successful here. There're people here who can do this type of thing so much better. The ingredients are different from what we do. My [original] musicals aren't Broadway, but epic musical theater in an operatic style. The only way I could bring a new color to Broadway is by presenting my style, my mentality. "

Short runs are not the experience he's had. His life as a jack of all musical trades forever changed when he was chosen to translate Tim Rice's lyrics for the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical *Evita* for Vienna.

"I really got hooked," he says, "Collaborating with Harold Prince (who was the director), rekindled my love of theater, which I was drawn to since childhood. *Cats* was a phenomenon, but Broadway musicals, in general, only became popular in German-speaking countries in the late 70s after the phenomenal success of *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* on the West End. Not only did Lloyd Webber 'reinvent,' so to speak, the musical for the West End and on Broadway, but also for us."

Kunze has enjoyed enormous success at home, not only as an adaptor/translator of American musicals, but also as a book writer/lyricist of his own works (which have played Europe as well as Asia). However, Kunze says, that when the American producers of *Dance of the Vampires* told him that Broadway is a different audience [from a European one] and that we appreciate another kind of humor, he understood why they wanted to bring in Ives and other elements, such as a Broadway

choreographer (2002 Tony-nominated John Caraffa).

Kunze knows Broadway. He became a huge fan while living and working here for nearly a decade. He returned to Europe reluctantly but couldn't afford to stay here any longer "thanks to the insane expenses I was being wrongly penalized with, not once but several times, by a dictatorial and unreasonable co-op board."

He says it was not a totally crazy idea to want to turn Polanski's film into a musical. "Unlike here," notes Kunze, "the film was a hit in Europe from its initial release. However, it did carry risks, because it's a spoof. It wasn't a movie that could be easily transferred to stage. Spoofs are difficult, so I had to find a style to make it work. The film doesn't have a real protagonist, and it was done in a shameless parody style, which Roman liked a lot. It never took advantage of the possibilities for music."

When he began the adaptation, his relationship with Polanski was extraordinarily close. "But musical theater was not his cup of tea," he states, "and it was left to me. He made suggestions and had final approval.

"Anything can be adapted to the musical stage," he continued. "One factor is how well you dramatize it. If you are successful doing that, you can adapt it for a musical. How well it's done is a matter of craft."

The 59-year-old writer/lyricist was born in Prague of Austrian parents. Kunze's father was a journalist; his mother, an actress. At age eight, he began writing a newspaper, which led to self-publishing a teen magazine in Stuttgart. In his teens, he was staging plays he wrote for various schools. He soon fell victim to rock 'n roll fever and became such an Elvis fan that he learned to play guitar -- but not at the expense of his studies. His favorite subjects were Latin, history and German literature. Amazingly, he found time to found and music direct a trio that performed in the style of his idols, the Kingston Trio. In his late teens, he was writing songs - in Latin!

"I seemed to be brilliant in everything," laughs Kunze, "but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was adrift. I wanted to become a politician, then it would be a monk, a philosophy professor, or, like my father, a journalist." But he settled on law and, by 1969, he was a law clerk. Quickly losing interest in law, "I went back to studying -- out of sheer lack of direction, three more years on philosophy and history."

But remember, he also wrote songs -- and sometimes in German. A Hamburg folk group liked a few enough to record an album. "It was anything but a commercial success," he reports, "but it made me very aware of the music business."

He decided to produce, and his first recorded effort topped the German charts in 1970. In collaboration with composers such as Giorgio Moroder, Gilbert Becaud, Herbie Mann, Leonard Cohen and, among many others, Vangelis, Kunze has written more than 2,000 songs and title tunes for film and TV. He wrote and produced several international hits, including "Fly, Robin, Fly" and "Get Up and Boogie."

An attorney he worked with "dragged me to Broadway show. It was The Wiz, and, sitting there, I thought 'This works!' It was not the Broadway I was expecting. It wasn't Rodgers and Hammerstein, but contemporary music in a pop style that was used to tell a story. I decided then and there it was something I wanted to do."

The success of his translation of Evita, however, opened another door. Make that a floodgate.

Kunze quickly became the German/Austrian/Swiss adaptor of choice of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Stephen Sondheim and, among many others, Tim Rice and Elton John and Kander and Ebb. His

German-language adaptations of Broadway mega-musicals include *Cats* (which ran seven years in Vienna), *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Aspects of Love*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Into the Woods*, *Follies*, *Assassins*, *The Lion King*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *City of Angels*, *A Chorus Line*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and, most recently, *Mamma Mia!*

Kunze is a full-time writer, with projects that have included TV shows, non-fiction books and magazine features. What he loves about theater "is getting to tell stories." He began telling them to a lot of people in 1991 with his first musical [*Hexen, Hexen* (*Witches, Witches*)]. More recently, he found himself drawn to the life of Austria's Empress Elisabeth, which resulted in *Elisabeth* (1992), which became a mega-hit, running six years in Vienna. It's also been a hit in Japan, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Hungary and is regarded as the birthing of a new contemporary European musical theater. He followed the long-running *Vampires* with another megahit *Mozart!* (1999).

By the time of *Vampires*, Kunze had really mastered his craft, because in translating a show into another language, it's not merely a job of translating, but adapting the book and the lyrics so that it works for a foreign-speaking audience. "It's tricky, because Sondheim is Sondheim and Lloyd Webber is Lloyd Webber, but then I have to step into their personas and, in a totally different language, convey the same message and rhythms."

That was not a problem on *Vampires*, because neither Jim Steinman, the composer, nor Polanski, speak German. "Fortunately, I'm fluent in English," laughs Kunze, "so it was written in English and then adapted into German. Now, with being on Broadway, we've come full circle."

Kunze is presently working on the libretto of his first opera, *Raoul*, about Raoul Wallenberg, who rescued several thousand Jews from the holocaust; and, with composer Sylvester Levay, he's doing an adaptation of Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, which is slated for the West End next year.