

What's New on the Rialto?

Interview with Michael Kunze of Dance of the Vampires

by Nancy Rosati

Michael Kunze is not a household name in the United States, but European audiences are very familiar with his work. Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, to Austrian parents, he grew up in Germany. At the age of eight, he was writing a newspaper for his friends and printing it with carbon paper. By 14, he was mimeographing 100 copies of a monthly magazine and staging several of his own plays at school.

In high school, Michael discovered several loves - Elvis Presley, The Kingston Trio, Latin, history, German Literature, and a 17 year old girl named Roswitha Wussow, whom he later married. His career choices vacillated between being a journalist like his father, to being a "politician, monk, or philosophy professor." He received several scholarships by achieving the highest degree of all Bavarian graduates in 1964 and decided to study law.

Michael's varied career includes writing over 2000 recorded songs, four original musicals, several TV show scripts, a number of books, and adapting over 20 musicals into German. He holds several international awards, including 79 gold and platinum records.

Currently in New York, Michael is overseeing his latest production, Dance of the Vampires , which features his first English libretto and lyrics. The show is already a smash hit in Europe, and Broadway is about to receive this much anticipated version starring Michael Crawford.

I spoke with Michael at the Minskoff Theatre on the morning of their first preview.

Nancy Rosati: I was reading your bio - this is quite an extensive resume!

Michael Kunze: (laughing) I've just been around a long time already. That's all.

NR: Most of your career has been in Europe, but you've worked in the U.S. from time to time.

MK: Yes. I had an apartment in New York for eight years. I wanted to get to know the business here and I learned a lot.

NR: You went to law school originally.

MK: Yes, but I never really intended to become a lawyer. I had a very good time as a student and I had to study something ... (laughs) But I never intended to become a lawyer. What I really worked on was legal history, and not so much the actual law.

NR: And you were writing pop lyrics at the same time.

MK: Yes, I was. I do a lot of adaptations of musical shows. I didn't really want to continue with that because now I do my own shows, but I got a call from Bjorn Ulvaeus of ABBA. As it turned out, the very first song of mine that was recorded when I was still a pupil was done by a group called the Hootenanny Singers, who later changed their name to ABBA. The song was in German, but the English title was "When All Rivers Dry Out." It was a love song for my girlfriend, who is now my wife. That's very long ago but it all came back when Bjorn called me and asked me if I would do his Mamma Mia! in German. I met him in Stockholm and we both remembered that song.

NR: I laughed when I read the part in your bio about creating "Fly, Robin, Fly" as kind of a joke on the disco music trend.

MK: I was producing a lot of stuff at the time, things I liked and things I didn't like, because you can't only do what you really want to do. I had a session in the studio and I had a few hours of time left. I still had some musicians around, and an arranger I had worked with always wanted to write a song. I told him, "Now we have two hours, let's do it. Let's record it as a demo tape." We asked some studio girls to come in and sing on it and that was that.

The publisher sold it to a small American label, Midland Records. At that time, this label was working with the so-called record pools. The disco scene was just evolving and the big record companies didn't give their records for free to the disc jockeys, but the small labels did. They put it in a record pool and somehow, this record we'd made as a joke caught on. It made the Top 60 on the chart, so we did an entire album with "Fly, Robin, Fly" and it became a Number One hit. We also did "Get Up and Boogie." Unfortunately, when a thing is such a success, then it becomes work.

I was very tense in those days. I tried to achieve everything at the same time. I had this number one hit in the States, which was terrific, but I couldn't really enjoy it. I was trying to figure out what I could do next. How could I prove that I deserved this success? Now I'm a little bit more relaxed and I'm enjoying having this show (Dance of the Vampires).

NR: So you started writing books about the Witch Trials?

MK: Yes. That was when I gave up producing. I decided to do something I'd really like to do and I wrote a book [The Pappenheimer Trial]. It was really successful but I didn't do it for that reason. I just wanted to write down that story.

NR: After you finished the book, did you return to music?

MK: Yes. I was in New York and I did productions for Atlantic Records and produced some American artists. I was here a lot and my attorney at that time had always wanted to take me to a Broadway show. I kept saying, "I don't like musicals. I don't want to go," because my idea of a Broadway show was people dancing with a straw hat.

NR: (laughing) Somewhat of an outdated description, don't you think?

MK: It was totally outdated. He took me to The Wiz and I was excited because it was contemporary and it told a story with my kind of music. I thought, "This is something I could do as well." As it happens, Andrew Lloyd Webber called me and asked if I would do Evita in

German.

NR: Is it very difficult to do something like that?

MK: No, it's not too difficult if you've been a song writer all your life. It's putting words to music and rewriting it in a way the original writer would have written it if he knew that language. It is a rewrite, but it's done from the point of view of the original writer. I really enjoy doing it. Then *Evita* became a success and I did *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *A Chorus Line*, and several others. The musical as we know it now was unknown in Germany. All we knew about the musical was *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*.

NR: What about *Three Penny Opera*?

MK: Yes, but that was in the '30s. These contemporary shows became a success in the '80s. I became pretty close with Hal Prince, who did *Phantom of the Opera*, *Evita*, and *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*. Hal always told me, "You must write your own show." I thought about it and decided I wanted to write it my way. I didn't want to just copy the other ones, so it took some time until I found a subject. I wrote a show called *Elisabeth*. Not to neglect the traditional Broadway style, but I wanted to write it with my musical taste and my way of telling a story. I didn't want to stick to some traditional formula. It turned out to be different because it's more operatic, more epic than usual Broadway musicals.

NR: Was the process of writing a musical what you expected it to be?

MK: The difficult thing was to sell it, to find someone to produce it. It was also difficult to find someone to do the music. The first musical I rewrote three times with three different composers because I was never satisfied. As it happens, the final version was done by the same arranger, Sylvester Levay, who did his first composition with me, "Fly, Robin, Fly." He did it the way I really wanted him to do it.

The problem with composers is that they want to dominate and that doesn't work with me and my idea of a musical. I think the story comes first and not the songs. The songs have to serve the story, like the words. What I want to do is very story-oriented. Sylvester worked in the movies and he was trained to serve a story as a film composer.

NR: Was it successful?

MK: *Elisabeth* was extremely successful. It's now in its tenth year and it's scheduled in Japan till 2006. It's done very well although it's never been performed in an English speaking country.

NR: Tell me about *Dance of the Vampires* since we're sitting here in the Minskoff, awaiting your first preview.

MK: The idea to do *Dance of the Vampires* came from the production company that did *Elisabeth*. They were looking for someone to write it. They had the idea to use the film as a base. I was interested because I always liked the movie but it was very clear - the movie is a spoof on vampire films and you cannot just put it on stage. You have to have real characters on stage that the audience can identify with. In that movie you don't even have a protagonist. The show is very different from the film.

I went to meet Roman Polanski in Paris and over lunch I convinced him that this could be a great musical. He was smart enough to say, "You know, Michael, I don't know anything about theatrical theater. I'm a film director. You do what you want." I wrote a libretto with lyrics, everything except the music. He read it and he loved it. He wanted to have a typical musical composer but I said, "No, the only thing I know about it is that it must be a rock and pop

musical. It wouldn't work as an old fashioned musical."

My first choice was Jim Steinman. I didn't know him and I didn't know anything about him. I only knew his songs, but all of his songs are little operas and I thought, "This guy can really write for the stage. He's very dramatic." We contacted him through his publisher and got word back that he was very interested. I met him in the studio in New York and he was excited about the idea. He knew the film and had always wanted to do a vampire musical. I originally thought, "That's a problem because this isn't really a vampire musical - this is a spoof," but it turned out that he was very ready to do it.

NR: What about Michael Crawford?

MK: He came in much, much later. We did the show for two years in Vienna. Then it was transferred to a larger theater in Germany where it's still running. Roman Polanski directed it. Jim brought in his manager who was the first one to say that he'd like to bring it to New York. It took five years before they found serious investors to bring it to Broadway. Crawford saw it in Vienna and he was interested but not committed. I think Jim took him to a studio and they recorded some of the songs. Then he became really thrilled. To be honest, this is what financed the show - his name. It's such an expensive show that I don't think we could have found enough investors without him.

NR: How's he doing?

MK: He's great - he is wonderful! I was concerned at the beginning that it might be another Phantom of the Opera, but here he really shows his talent as a comedian. He's so funny.

NR: You have a lot of technical problems obviously, since you've had to cancel some previews.

MK: It's a complicated show. There are technical problems but we have producers who realize it's very dangerous for the cast if it's not fully rehearsed. They have to be sure about where to go, when to stay behind the wings and not run into the scene because something is still moving or a trap door is still open. I think it was a security issue. Tonight is the first preview.

NR: Are you nervous?

MK: I am nervous. I always love previews because that's the moment of truth when the audience comes in. You never know what will happen.

NR: Are you going to be making a lot of changes during the preview period?

MK: Oh yeah, there will be changes. We already know that there will be more changes, but still, the audience will help us a lot in improving it.

NR: Then you open and face the New York critics.

MK: Well, the critics will not be too great. The advance is great, though. My guess is that traditional Broadway critics will not love it and will not embrace it. I think it is too wild for them, but that is what I love about the show. It is not a lukewarm thing - it is a wild show. If you think that Broadway should be in the tradition of Rodgers and Hammerstein and that it should be a middle-of-the-road family entertainment, then you won't like this show. It's very contemporary music. You have all this making fun with skulls on stage and people laugh about it. Of course it's something that gives a relief because people are quite rightly afraid of a lot of things today. They have every right to be scared, but here they will have two and a half hours where they can laugh about death, which I think is very good, especially now.

NR: The timing seems to be right. Silliness is in. Look at Hairspray ,Mamma Mia! , and The Producers .

MK: Yes. The show is silly, but there is an undercurrent that is not so silly. I think people will enjoy the show because they can laugh about nightmares. I do hope that this show draws a very young audience like it does in Europe. It's like a rock concert in Europe. They scream and they come dressed up.

NR: Like Rocky Horror ?

MK: It's in that direction. I do hope this works out. You never know. For me it's even tougher because I don't know the Broadway audience, but I know audiences around the world and I just don't believe that they are so different. I am lucky enough to have these wonderful people here doing it. It starts with the producers. I get spoiled because I don't believe all the stories about Broadway producers anymore. These people are so nice and devoted to the actors. They treat them so well, and the cast really appreciates that. Also, John Rando and John Carrafa are a great team. They're never nervous, never shouting, never showing that they're insecure. They must be sometimes but they give everybody the feeling that they're in control. You'll see - it will be great. It's a great atmosphere and everybody's in a great mood.

NR: If this does well, are you going to try to do more Broadway?

MK: Definitely. Elisabeth might not be the right show for Broadway but I think Mozart is. I also have a new project. Elisabeth is internationally successful, but it would be tremendously more successful if the English speaking countries would accept it. I always wanted to write for an international audience. I think I have something to offer because I have a different approach. I think it's another color. I'm not just another Broadway writer. I never will be, but in a collaboration like this with someone like David Ives, something totally different can come out. A lot of people have said, "We don't know how Dance of the Vampires will fare, but this is unique. This is a show Broadway has never seen. It's different." I don't want to be successful by copying things from others. Maybe I can add something new. That is what I really want to do.