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It's a New World, Golde

By: Peter Filichia

Had a chat with Michael Kunze, a librettist-lyricist whose name may not mean much to you, but it sure packs a wallop in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Lithuania, Holland, and Japan. In fact, Kunze told me that if he were sitting in a restaurant in Japan instead of in a lounge at New York's Marriott Marquis, he might be mobbed by fans. Mobbed.

Not yet here in New York, though that could change if *Dance of the Vampires* (for which Kunze wrote the original German libretto and is credited as co-author on the English version) is as big a hit as it has been in Europe, where *Tanz der Vampire* has been running for five years now -- half the run that Kunze's first musical, *Elisabeth*, has amassed on the world's stages since it opened a little over 10 years ago. In the interim, Kunze has added a third jewel to his triple crown with a musical called *Mozart*, which has been playing on one European stage or another since 1999.

That's pretty good for a guy who hated musicals while he was growing up in Prague. "I never liked opera, operetta, or the Broadway musical," says the 57-year-old wordsmith. "That was the music of my parents. I grew up with Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll, so I couldn't connect to anything else." As a result, lyrics to pop songs are what he wrote in the late '60s and early '70s, resulting in such success that Atlantic Records brought him to New York in 1975. One night, an attorney for the company offered to take him to a Broadway show and Kunze felt he had to go just to be polite. The show was *The Wiz* (Atlantic did the musical's cast album and the attorney probably got comps).

Says Kunze, "I was surprised to see that you could tell a story with contemporary, pop-oriented music. I thought Broadway was people wearing straw hats and tipping them in time to the music."

Still, Kunze didn't start work on a musical then and there; he kept writing pop songs ("Get Up and Boogie") and even a book, *Highroad to the Stake*, about a family decimated by the Holocaust. But one day in the late '70s, he received a call from Andrew Lloyd Webber -- "when Andrew's head was only this big" he says, holding each of his hands above each of his shoulders, "and not this big," he adds, extending his arms out as far as they can go. Lloyd Webber was a fan of Kunze's pop lyrics and asked if he'd translate and adapt Tim Rice's lyrics for *Evita* into German. Kunze agreed, and went on to do the same for *Cats*.

I saw his work on that show when I was in Vienna in 1987. While I don't know a word of German, I was impressed that Gus the Theatre Cat's line "And I know how to let the cat out of the bag" got as much of a laugh from the Viennese audience as it did from the crowds with whom I saw *Cats* in London, New York, and Philadelphia. When I mention this, Kunze replies that he always makes an effort to put a joke where it was originally, even if it's a different joke because of idiomatic eccentricities. He also says that when he translated and adapted Sondheim's shows -- *Company*, *Follies*, and *Into the Woods* -- he put the internal rhymes in the same places. "Doing *The Lion King* after doing one of Sondheim's shows," he says, "is a piece of cake."

After adapting *The Phantom of the Opera*, he sat down with its director, Harold Prince, who said it

was time that that Kunze write his own musical. Kunze said that he'd been thinking about dramatizing the life of Emperor Franz Joseph of the Hapsburg Empire, the last monarch of Austria before democracy was introduced to that country. Some months later, he brought Prince an outline and some lyrics. "I don't like dialogue in musicals," Kunze tells me. "I think it's unnatural for people to sing on stage, but if you've convinced the audience that singing really means that these people are talking, why interrupt this dream and go back to having them only talk again?"

Prince was surprised to see that the musical that had started out to be about Franz Joseph now centered on his wife, Elisabeth -- "whose story," Kunze says, "is one of liberation. She wanted the right to be herself, not an instrument of the system. It's a modern topic, and that's one reason why the show is so big in Japan, because women are going through this there right now." Kunze claims that Prince liked the show nonetheless and said he'd look for an American composer -- which caused Kunze to stop the project right there, because Kunze has his own ideas about theater music and how it should sound. "I regard Hal as a mentor," he says, "and, for every project I think of, I ask his opinion. But he is of another generation. Hal doesn't like rock music on stage at all. He hates it. But that's the way I want to tell a story."

"Wait a minute," I ask. "When did Elisabeth live?" When Kunze replies "1837-1898" and sees the puzzled expression on my face, he explains that "Music in our world is more than just music; it's a way of expressing yourself. You use music like you use fashion, like a coat you wear. I think it's unnatural to have your emotions expressed in music that is not contemporary, for that's the music that you hear every day."

"So your Mozart sings contemporary music?" I ask slowly, trying to mask the astonishment in my voice. "Yes, it's rock music," Kunze answers. "Pure rock 'n' roll. A show that is not terrific, like *Aida*, is doing relatively well because it reflects what people on the street want to hear. When you go to a Rodgers and Hammerstein show, it's wonderful, but it's like going to a museum. Musical theater has to be alive. That's why I don't understand shows like *The Wild Party* being on Broadway. I was sitting there hearing one song of the '20s after the other, but it had no relationship to my life. Why write a show today in the musical vernacular of a time that is not ours? Why go into a world that is gone? It was a great time, yes, but if you write a new show, it has to have something to do with our lives."

"So if you had written *The Wild Party*," I croak after finding my voice, "you would have written it with rock music?" "Yes!" he says enthusiastically. "The words we use today will never be the exact words they used then, will they? Musical theater is a living theater, and today's audiences have to feel that this concerns them, this is their life. I love the stage now. I really love it. I think the conventions on Broadway have been so fixed because you had this incredible time of Rodgers and Loesser, but now you have to do it in a way that reaches the audience. It doesn't matter that you have a traditional story. If I have a story to tell and I want you to feel it and understand it, and I'll use my musical language to make you get into that story."

When I ask how the critics have reacted to all this, Kunze shrugs and shakes his head in pity. "If you do something new, critics will never understand it," he says. "They will always compare what you do with what's already on the market. My shows are not musicals, and they're not operas because they have contemporary music. But, basically, they are operas because they have very epic stories and they are dramatic. I call them drama-musicals. They're not musical dramas because the drama is even more important in them. The critics don't appreciate them, but the audiences! I don't want to boast but, every night, you would be amazed at the audience response."

He admits that critics in Europe wield less power than they do in America, so he's prepared if *Dance of the Vampires* is not a success here. "I produced an album for Gilbert Beaud," he says, mentioning a French composer-singer of yore. "He wrote a Broadway show called *Roza* that only ran a few days -- even with Harold Prince directing -- and he was heartbroken about that and never recovered from it. Not me. It is a dream come true just to have a show on Broadway, so if it's a

success, it'll just be something on top of that. But if it isn't a hit, I can still say, 'Well, I had a Broadway show.' And then I'll work on doing an Off-Broadway show, a very small show about Libby Holman."

I know Holman as the chanteuse who appeared in Rodgers and Hart's *The Garrick Gaieties*, Dietz and Schwartz's *The Little Show*, and Cole Porter's *You Never Know*. "So would Libby Holman sing rock music?" I ask, steeling myself for the answer. "Well, she basically sang American folk songs," Kunze replies. "If you listen to the latest Bob Dylansongs, that's the style I'll use: folksy, but with rock melodies." He sits back and smiles. "I think that would be just the right stuff for her."

I'm picturing Anna and the King singing rock music -- and Annie Oakley, Harold Hill, Dolly Levi, and Tevye. Well, wasn't it Tevye who said, "It's a new world, Golde?" Michael Kunze has written four hit musicals and has 56 gold records, not to mention 23 platinum ones. His shows have grossed more than \$350 million. There are 69 fan clubs for his works and over 100 websites devoted to them. So who says I have all the answers?