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The Hour

By Dave Rosenberg

“We lived for 12 years near Washington, Conn. while our kids were growing up,” said famed Broadway composer Charles Strouse, speaking by phone. “Then my wife got tired of calling the exterminator.”

With a spate of hit shows behind him, Strouse, who now lives in Manhattan, is gearing up for celebrations of his 80th birthday on June 7. Wednesday, he’ll be saluted by pianist/vocalist Eric Comstock. Then comes the revival of one of his biggest musical hits, “Applause,” which kicks off the 15th season of the invaluable Encores series.

Based on the classic film, “All About Eve,” the musical originally opened in 1970 and ran for 896 performances, thanks to excellent reviews and the presence of Lauren Bacall in the Bette Davis role. It was Bacall’s first tuner and the show was tailored to her talents as well as her basso profundo voice. (“Applause” won four Tony Awards.)

“The first script was not to Bacall’s satisfaction,” recalled Strouse. “At the time, 20th Century Fox, which owned the screenplay, didn’t permit its use. But she called her friends Betty Comden and Adolph Green and, when they came in, Fox loosened its grip. That’s one of the things that made a difference.”

The film was, of course, a masterpiece of style, winning all sorts of accolades. Its most famous line, “Fasten your seatbelts, it’s going to be a bumpy night,” in turn became one of the stage show’s best numbers. Other hits were “But Alive” and the title number. At Encores, which features classy new looks at old musicals, Christine Ebersole plays the Bacall role.

What made the film a natural for stage adaptation was that it was actually a story about the theater with all its difficulties and temperaments. Writing a musical, said Strouse, is like a marriage, requiring compromise and collaboration for success.

But the late 60s were tricky times for tuners. After “Hair” opened in 1967, critics said that henceforth every show must also be a rock musical. Actually, Strouse and partner, lyricist Lee Adams, had written the semi-rock “Bye Bye Birdie” in 1960.

“It was dispiriting to guys like me,” said Strouse. “But there are a lot of sheep in the world and sometimes you say it makes no difference and sometimes you want to be in the latest fashion. Most composers are touched by it because they’re touched by growing up and dying. There are so many choices. I did what I did but there are mornings, may I tell you, it’s tough to get up.”

