

From Solo to Duet

By Philip Berroll

"We do seem to be, for lack of a better term, strange bedfellows," says Benjamin (Rusty) Magee.

Mr. Magee is talking about his collaboration with Charles Busch on a new musical, *The Green Heart*, which opens April 1 at the Variety Arts Theatre under the auspices of Manhattan Theatre Club. Theirs is, indeed, an unlikely partnership.

On the surface, the two men appear to have only two things in common: both are in their early 40s (they refuse to be more specific) and are veterans of more than a dozen years in New York theatre, as creators and performers. But while Mr. Magee, in his stage appearances, usually sits at a piano in semi-formal attire, Mr. Busch's costumes are a bit more striking -- colorful dresses and wigs, fake breasts, and high heels.

Mr. Busch is probably New York's best-known drag performer, the author and star of such camp extravaganzas as *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, *Psycho Beach Party*, and *Red Scare on Sunset*.

Mr. Magee, a pianist and composer, is a regular on the comedy-club circuit, where he plays and sings his own topical, satirical tunes. Where Mr. Busch, in performance, is wildly flamboyant, Mr. Magee is low-key; where Mr. Magee often lampoons political targets, Mr. Busch says flatly, "My humor is not political."

Even in person, they are a study in contrasts. The shaven-headed Mr. Busch tends to measure his words carefully before committing himself to a firm statement, while Mr. Magee, his thinning red hair covered by a baseball cap, often speaks in fully formed sentences, even small paragraphs.

Yet they have been able to find common ground on *The Green Heart*, subtitled "a musical/black comedy/romance/thriller," for which Mr. Busch has written the book and Mr. Magee the music and lyrics. Based on a short story by Jack Ritchie (on which Elaine May's 1970 film comedy *A New Leaf* was based), *The Green Heart* follows the rocky romance of William Graham, a dissolute playboy, and Henrietta Lowell, a gawky heiress and botany professor more comfortable with plants than people. It's especially rocky because William intends, after marrying Henrietta, to murder her for her money. The story "is somewhat broadly comic,

satirical," says Mr. Busch, "but ultimately, it's a story of redemption -- about a man who goes from selfishness to perhaps having the capacity to love."

The history of *The Green Heart* begins with the off-stage partnership of Mr. Magee and his actress wife, Alison Fraser, a Tony nominee for her roles in *Romance Romance* and *The Secret Garden*. (The couple met fourteen years ago while appearing in a production of *Pump Boys and Dinettes* in Indianapolis; they have a six-year-old son, Nathaniel.) In 1992, they were looking for new projects, and hit on the idea of adapting the Ritchie story for the stage. After seeing *Red Scare on Sunset* at the WPA Theatre and subsequently reading Mr. Busch's other plays, they decided that he would be perfect for the job.

The prospect appealed to Mr. Busch. "I've been asked a lot of times to collaborate on a musical," he says, "but it's always been something campy -- you know, 'Cycle Sluts From Babylon,' like that. I wanted something with strong characters who I could relate to. I think that's what we have here... and also, a contemporary twist on the traditional musical comedy. It's almost like a big intimate musical comedy, if that makes any sense."

By himself, Mr. Busch was used to working quickly. His collaboration with Mr. Magee, however, stretched out over four years, including a six-month period when they put it aside to work on other projects. Mr. Busch jokes that it began to seem as if they'd been working together "since Dick (Rodgers) and Oscar (Hammerstein) started on *Allegro*." Not that they were hampered by a clash of egos. Both men speak admiringly of each other's talents; indeed, according to Mr. Busch, it was the originality of his partner's musical mind that helped to draw out the writing process. "I'd get an idea for a song that I couldn't possibly develop myself," he recalls, "and Rusty would come up with something that I could never in a million years have dreamed of."

The songs in *The Green Heart* are a crazily eclectic mix: old-fashioned ballads and duets, comic ensemble numbers, dark tunes reminiscent of Kurt Weill. They reflect the varied background of Mr. Magee, a former musical consultant to the Yale Drama School. "I really am an odd hybrid," he agrees, "influenced by rock 'n' roll and pop music, as well as the intellectual study of classical music and theory."

Once they had completed and cast the show, the rehearsal period began, bringing with it a new possibility for conflict: the director is Mr. Busch's longtime collaborator, Kenneth Elliott.

But Mr. Magee insists that he never felt excluded by the other two men. "I had worked with Ken before, when I wrote some songs for Harry Kondeleon's play *Zero Positive* at the Public Theater," he says. "So I was familiar with him. It could have been a disaster this time, because we both had strong feelings about the material ...but thank God, it was not."

Nor did the composer have any problem working with Ms. Fraser, who was cast as William's scheming Eurotrash mistress. (The leads are Karen Trott, last seen in the one-woman show *The Springhill Singing Disaster*, and David Andrew MacDonald.) "There's give and take," says Mr. Magee. "Sometimes she'll say, 'Rusty, you might want to take a look at these words, think about that' -- and you can't be an egotist about it, because sometimes she's right on the nose." He laughs. "And sometimes she's not."

If *The Green Heart* has a successful run, there are tentative plans to take it to Broadway, where it would be a rarity -- an American musical with a small (13-member) cast, and without big stars or special effects. But Mr. Busch, for one, is undaunted: "Even Andrew Lloyd Webber has said that the era of the mega-musical may soon be over. And now you have successful shows like *Rent* and *Bring on Da Noise...*, which are more 'human' and intimate."

Both men speak frankly of their hopes that *The Green Heart* will give a boost to their own careers -- to move beyond their loyal but small followings to a wider audience. Mr. Magee has had one previous brush with the mainstream: last year, he and a partner were commissioned to write a song for Jackie Mason's show, *Love Thy Neighbor*. But the pair had a dispute with Mr. Mason and his producers over payment and writing credit, and the deal fell through.

"It was tough for me," says Mr. Magee, "because I would have loved to have had a song in a Broadway show." However, Mr. Magee got some measure of revenge: in his comedy act, he sings the disputed song ... in an imitation of Mr. Mason's distinctive voice.

Whatever the fate of their current show, Mr. Busch and Mr. Magee intend to continue their performing careers. Both admit that one of their few real frustrations while working on *The Green Heart* was having to sit on the sidelines while others performed their work. "It looked like it was going to be so glamorous," says Mr. Busch, "that I wanted to be up there."

But did they ever feel that they could have done a better job with the material than the members of the cast?

Mr. Magee laughs nervously. "It was more like, 'I think I could have done it *differently*.'"

Originally written for Our Town weekly newspaper.