

VIVE LE VAUDEVILLE!

Vaudeville is a great theatrical tradition in France—wholly different from, and as charming as, the vaudeville that developed in the United States.

At first, a *vaudeville* was a satirical cabaret song—just a song, not a play or story. Vaudeville songs took familiar popular tunes and set new, comic lyrics to them. Vaudeville lyrics satirized social issues or public figures of the day.

This song-based vaudeville tradition has come down to the present day, as troupes such as The Capitol Steps transform *The Music Man's* “76 Trombones” into “76 Unknowns” (meaning the vast pool of Presidential candidates who started the present race), and Carol Channing’s paean to diamonds becomes “Don Imus Is A Girl’s Best Friend.”

In the early 19th century, the term *vaudeville* came into use in a new way. It described a type of play—specifically, a comedy lavishly bedecked with songs. Musical theatre as we experience it was unknown in those days; French audiences might see a sung-through opera one night and a straight play the next, but the new vaudeville hybrid soon swept the nation. Eugene Labiche’s charming, sprightly play *An Italian Straw Hat* debuted in 1851, quickly becoming a popular favorite.

The French theatre’s *variétés* format is the nearest cousin to American vaudeville. The *variétés* presented a mixed bill “variety acts”—music, dance, circus, juggling, trained animal acts, travelogues, comedy and very short plays. This *variétés* format also became very popular over on this side of the Atlantic, but in America, it was known as “vaudeville.”

And where did the term vaudeville come from? It started out as *vau de Vire*, meaning “valley of Vire”—the region around the Norman town of Vire, which was the birthplace of many of those satirical songs, properly called *chansons du Vau de Vire*.

At the same time, the term *voix de ville* (“voices of the city”) was applied to songs of courtly love. By the end of the 16th century, these two terms had collided and the result was *vaudeville*.

Putting On Our Top Hat

South Coast Repertory’s 2008-09 season begins with a bang — not a heavy cannonball, but an explosion of confetti, feathers, comedic glitter and musical fun called *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville*.

This world premiere is the work of playwright John Strand, whose previous SCR productions include *Tom Walker* (2001, Second Stage) and *Lovers and*

productions ranging from *The Beard of Avon* to *Of Mice and Men*, including *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Only Child* and the refreshed score for *A Christmas Carol*.

An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville tells the story of a groom with doubts, a bride with guts and a missing hat. Set in gilded Gotham at the turn of the 20th century, the play opens on the day that Winslow Fadley and Helen Noncort are to be knit up in holy wedlock. The carriages are reserved, the bride is dressed, the only thing standing between Fadley and domestic bliss is — you guessed it — an Italian straw hat.



Daniel Blinkoff (Fadley) is astounded to see a horse wearing an Italian straw hat — with fruit!

Executioners (2004, Argyros Stage). The world premiere of *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville* on the Segerstrom Stage this September completes the trifecta for this gifted playwright. Strand spent ten happy years in Paris, working as a bilingual theatre journalist and running New York University’s Paris program. His other plays include *Lincolnesque*, *Lorenzaccio* and the musical *The Highest Yellow* with Michael John LaChiusa.

Strand’s translation and adaptation of Eugene Labiche’s beloved 1851 French vaudeville *Une chapeau de paille d’Italie* was commissioned by SCR. This gleeful romp of a play has been well matched with the sparkling music of composer Dennis McCarthy. SCR audiences have enjoyed McCarthy’s original music in

On an early morning ride to calm his wedding-day jitters, Fadley was distracted just long enough for his horse to eat a hat left hanging on a parkland tree. Since no high society lady can be seen in public without a hat, bareheaded Annabelle takes an uninvited refuge in Fadley’s townhouse. If Fadley wants to bring his blushing bride home at the end of the day, he has to get rid of the hatless woman skulking in his bedroom. He needs a hat, stat!

The cast of *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville* mixes and matches SCR favorites with exciting debut performers. Daniel Blinkoff anchors the cast as Fadley, leading the rest of the cast in a merry wild-hat chase through the gaslit streets of New York City. Blinkoff brings the Everyman charm of Bob Cratchit from SCR’s *A Christmas Carol* and the youthful energy of *Nothing Sacred’s* Arkady Kirsanov and Todd in *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow*, all topped off with a glorious singing voice.

Los Angeles actress Erika Whalen has landed the role of Helen, the bride-to-be. In addition to starring in classic musicals such as *1776*, *Carousel* and *The Sound of Music*, Whalen is a proud alumna of South Coast Repertory’s Professional Conservatory program.

Michelle Duffy plays Annabelle, the owner of the missing hat. If you attended the Pacific Playwrights Festival reading of *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville* in 2007, you will remember Michelle’s luscious singing voice and pitch-perfect comic timing. More recently Michelle took the leading role in Pasadena Playhouse’s production of *Can-Can*.

Alan Blumenfeld takes the role of Napoleon P. Beauperthuis, Annabelle’s cuckolded husband. SCR welcomes Alan back to our stages, where he appeared in *A Feminine Ending* (Argyros) last season and *Born Yesterday* (Segerstrom) two seasons before.

Damon Kirsch, whose rich baritone was a highlight of last season’s *A Little Night Music* (he played Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm), comes back to us as Emile, Annabelle’s illicit paramour. He may be a hazard to Annabelle’s reputation, but he’s even more dangerous to Fadley’s possessions.

The splendid Patrick Kerr returns as Fadley’s Uncle Fez, owner of a very good heart and some very bad ears. Patrick played this role to great effect in the PPF reading; he was also seen in SCR’s world premiere of *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*, and in *The Triumph of Love*.

Audiences who cheered at last season’s *Taking Steps* will be happy to see the return of Kasey Mahaffy, whose *lazzi* of putting on a three-piece suit while tumbling down two flights of stairs brought down the house every single time. In *An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville* Kasey plays the tortured Tardiveau, who dreams of protecting and serving, but can’t seem to shake those pesky people who insist on following him. Or do they?

Melissa van der Schyff plays Clara, Fadley’s former girlfriend who went on to open her own business — a hat shop. While Clara may have the solution to Fadley’s problem locked in her storeroom, what she really wants is the key to his heart. Melissa played in the Broadway cast of *Big River* and the La Jolla Playhouse production of *Zhivago*, as well as numerous television and film appearances.

Matthew Koehler is the cast’s other newcomer, playing Helen’s lovelorn cousin Bobby. Matthew’s story is an actor’s dream — he had his talent recognized in SCR’s general auditions, where unknown actors put their best feet forward in hopes of being considered for a future SCR production. In Matthew’s case the dream came true! Southern California audiences may also have seen him in *Cabaret* at International City Theatre in Long Beach, or in Pasadena Playhouse’s premiere of *Ray Charles Live!*

Last but not least, SCR Founding Artist Richard Doyle originates the role of Karl Noncort, the penny-pinching, sentimental father of the bride. Noncort believes that nothing’s too good for his little girl on her wedding day — especially not the groom — but he keeps the bottom line in mind all the same.

Director Stefan Novinski helms this brilliant cast, following his great success with *A Little Night Music* last fall. Novinski is reunited with Dennis Castellano as music director; his previous SCR credits include *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Happy End* as well as the annual celebration of *A Christmas Carol*. Donna Marquet will design the scenery, Shigeru Yaji the costumes, Lonnie Rafael Alcaraz the lights, and Drew Dalzell the sound. SCR Literary Manager Megan Monaghan serves as dramaturg.

An Italian Straw Hat: A Vaudeville is the first of SCR’s five exciting world premieres in the 2008-09 season. So don your most elegant chapeau and join us for a delicious, delirious whirl of theatrical fun! There’s much more to come as the new season unfolds.