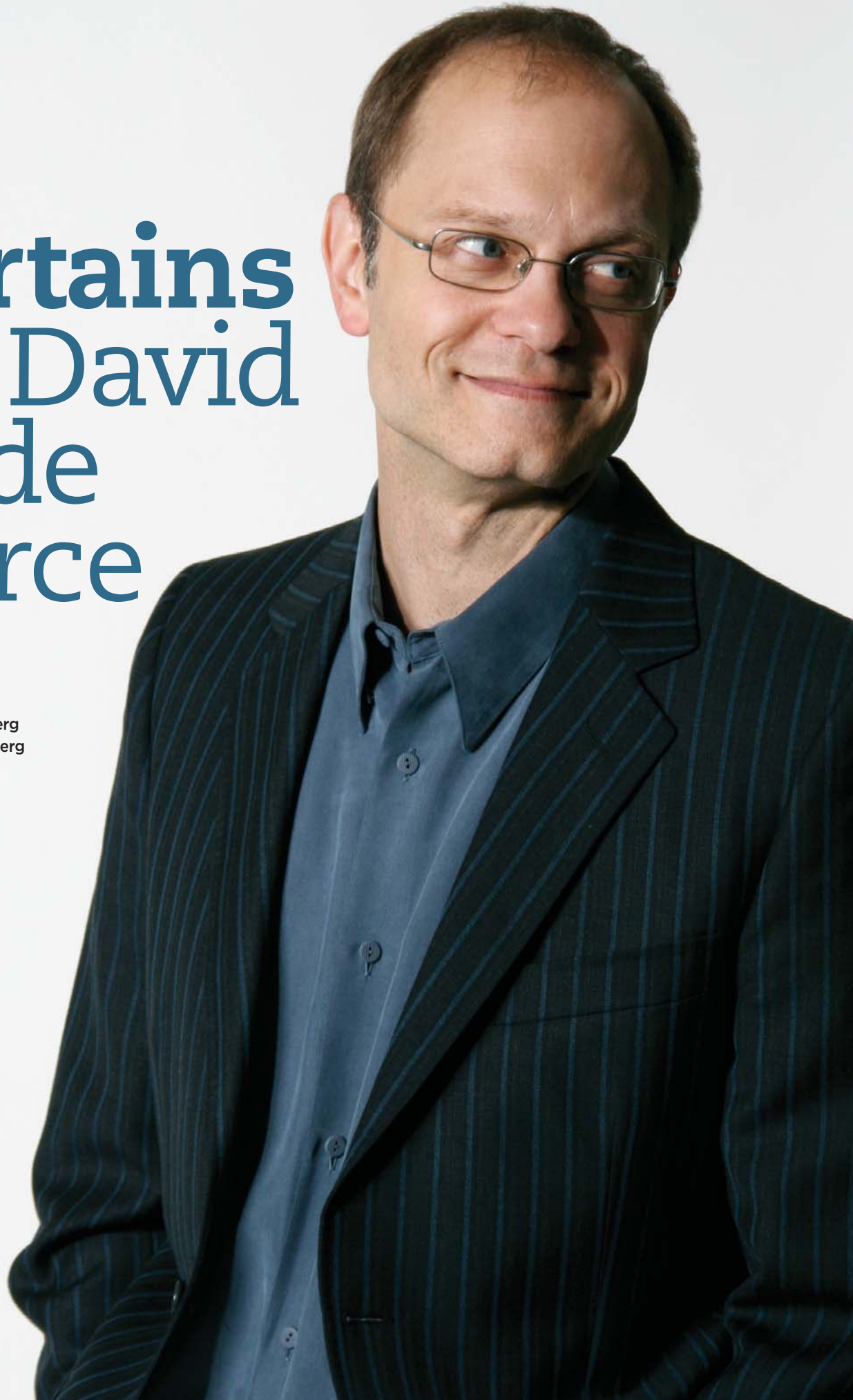


It's Curtains for David Hyde Pierce

by David C. Nichols
Photos: Gabriel Goldberg
Makeup: Jamie Greenberg



A SIGNIFICANT LOCAL EVENT this summer is the world premiere of *Curtains* at the Ahmanson Theatre, directed by Scott Ellis. It stars David Hyde Pierce in his first new show after over a year on Broadway in the Tony Award-winning *Monty Python's Spamalot*. It is a challenge that the award-winning actor welcomes as he talks over lunch at the Music Center before returning to New York.

"We start rehearsals in June and then we come back here in July," says the ever-erudite Pierce, in real life analogous to his *Frazier* character, Dr. Niles Crane, minus the neuroses, double the charm. "The first preview is July 25. I could have used a little more rest time after *Spamalot* but the opportunity to work with these people, to work with John Kander, that's not something you walk away from."

The murder mystery musical *Curtains* is the long-developed brainchild of composer Kander and the late Fred Ebb. Pierce relates, "I play a Boston homicide detective called in to solve a murder during the out-of-town tryout of a musical in 1959. He's also someone who secretly loves musicals. There's a bit of outside person brought backstage into the world of the theatre."

The format, Pierce confides, is "very tricky because part of the requirement in writing a mystery is that a lot of exposition has to happen. You give people all this evidence, clues, and the audience spends the evening trying to put it together before you get to the end when it's put together for them. That isn't always consistent with a musical which is why it's so great that here it's Kander and Ebb."

Pierce, an Emmy nominee for all 11 seasons of *Frazier* (and four-time winner) cannot quite hide his excitement as he discusses the cast of *Curtains*. "Everyone is just amazing. Debra Monk, Karen Ziemba, Jason Daniele, Jill Paice, John Bolton and on and on...a great cast. Karen plays the writer of the musical and Jason plays the composer, a husband-and-wife team." Since both Ebb and original librettist Peter Stone have passed away, modern mystery master Rupert Holmes has come aboard as librettist and Kander is doing double-duty.

Pierce notes, "The style of the show was very well established, the bulk of the score. Rupert looked at songs for specific characters, the general story and wrote a terrific new book to follow through. It's very funny, yet it's definitely a whodunit. Rupert is very carefully structuring the mystery aspect of it. If you know *Mystery of Edwin*

Drood, you know he's a very skilled mystery writer, and hopefully it has its share of shocks."

Curtains is only Pierce's third musical, after *The Boys From Syracuse* for Reprise! and *Spamalot*. "It's a new area for me," he confides. "For years, I wanted to do a musical precisely because it was something I hadn't done. When *Spamalot* came along, it was the perfect entrée. It wasn't like people had sent me up for, say, *Oklahoma!* It was a crossover musical with a lot of silliness...but also singing and dancing."

Pierce gives props to L.A.-based vocal coach Calvin Remsburg. "He's great," says Pierce. "I've worked with him for years now. He prepped me for *Spamalot*, and I've been coaching with him to prepare for *Curtains*." Pierce also coached with choreographer Cate Caplin, "who is terrific, before *Spamalot*, and now for the dancing in *Curtains*. For *Spamalot*,

since I had no idea what kind of dancing I'd be doing, she taught me everything. We worked tap, jazz, ballroom, all kinds of things. For *Curtains*, I got the chance to go to New York and work with the show's choreographer Rob Ashford to get a sense of what kind of dancing I'd be able to do. So, Cate and I can be more specific this time and have as few limitations as possible, so when I go into rehearsals, they can have as much as I'm able to give. I knew before I did *Spamalot*, and I certainly know now how many years and how much work all the people who dance and sing for a living, put into it. I have a lot of respect for that, so I also want in some way to fit in to that."

This, after playing Sir Robin in *Spamalot*, a show needing more discipline than its wacky source material (the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) might indicate. Pierce explains, "*Spamalot* was not over the top. It was, after all, directed by Mike Nichols, who is a genius, and performed by a very accomplished cast, Tim Curry, Chris Sieber, Sara Ramirez, Hank Azaria, Michael McGrath..." Pierce pauses, searching for the exact phrase. "Well, absurd things happened, but the style of performance was extremely close to the belt, very real, which made it work."

"It's one thing to all have fun in rehearsal, and getting it together, and opening night...but then you have to keep doing it. And if everyone has that same built-in sense that it isn't set, there's a basic architecture to the show yet that how any one moment as played is fluid, that's what keeps any show alive. That's when the audience actually perceives the fun, because it's happening in that moment. Anytime you do a musical, it's already a heightened reality just because people are

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singing. But how much is right to heighten it without losing the basic reality? My personal taste is that I don’t think the musical exists that shouldn’t be done that way. No matter how strange or outlandish or whatever, it’s just funnier if you play it more seriously.”

Pierce observes, “The built-in audience for *Spamalot* did not guarantee success. You had two challenges. One, you had to make it work for people who didn’t have a clue [about the movie] and two, you had to make it work for people who knew every single word. That didn’t make it easier. In the case of *Curtains*, we have Kander and Ebb, and anyone who knows musical theatre knows Kander and Ebb. It’s one of their last shows together and it’s just extraordinary music, them at the top of their game. Big old show tunes, beautiful ballads.

“I get to sing what I believe is the first song that John wrote both the music and lyrics for. The first time I ever sang it was in the rehearsal room. David Loud, our musical director, was at the piano. John said something like, ‘Well, maybe it’ll go more like this,’ and he sat down and I sang while John Kander played. Even if it had never gone any further than that, it’s something I’ll take with me for the rest of my life. And I think we all feel not only the poignancy of that, but the thrill of that, of being able to bring to life their valedictory, in something that I think taps what they do best.”

That was the case with *Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks* at the Geffen in 2001. When I confess that Pierce’s partnership with the legendary Uta Hagen

in Richard Alifieri’s dramedy was one of the most memorable double-acts I’ve ever seen, Pierce is visibly pleased. “That’s the greatest compliment you could pay me,” he says. “Doing that play with Miss Hagen was a dream. She was a dream partner, so theatrical, and yet always real. Another great compliment we got was from someone who said, ‘It’s not like watching a play, it’s like eavesdropping.’ Because her training went back to the Lunts, to Eva La Gallienne, it was extremely realistic yet a different style of acting, grander. That show was where I learned you could do both. We became very, very dear friends during that run, and remained that way until she died.”

As Pierce has remained close with his *Frazier* co-stars—“Eleven years, we’re like family. How could we not be? We see each other all the time.” He is clear-eyed yet optimistic about the future of the theatre. “I just finished a great biography of the Lunts. The fantastic shows they did in New York, and then they would tour around the country. They were like movie stars because everyone saw them, and saw this irreplaceable duo in the flesh, and they remembered them all their lives. That doesn’t happen so much any more. However, you look at the next generation, Cherry Jones, Brian O’Byrne, now known Broadway draws, and that’s hopeful. Theatre is finally provincial, and I mean that in the best way.

“For example, I went to hear the LA Philharmonic at Disney Hall when it first opened. There was this sense of wonder, people who had perhaps never been in a concert hall before, that this incredible space was here for their orchestra. Contrast that with the New York Philharmonic, where it’s not like that orchestra is taken for granted, but it’s been a part of the fabric of the city for so long there’s a different kind of expectant feeling. Familiar. They’re both valid responses. That’s what it’s finally about: the actual, physical experience of being there.” ■

CURTAINS

Opens Aug. 9
plays Tues.-Fri., 8 pm
Sat., 2 and 8 pm
Sun., 2 and 7:30 pm
ends Sept. 10
Tickets: \$30-\$95
Previews: July 25-
Aug. 6. \$25-\$95

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