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New musical 'Liberty Smith,' revival of 'Sabrina Fair' on tap at Ford's Theatre

By Jane Horwitz

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Ford's Theatre will offer a world-premiere musical set in the Revolutionary War era, "Liberty Smith," as part of its coming season, along with Horton Foote's play "The Carpetbagger's Children," starring Washington theater lights Holly Twyford, Nancy Robinette and Kimberly Schraf.

The season will open with "Sabrina Fair" (Oct. 1-24) by Samuel A. Taylor, a 1950s society romance about a chauffeur's daughter who grows up on an aristocratic family's Long Island estate and falls for one, and then the other, of the family's sons. The 1954 film "[Sabrina](#)" with Audrey Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart and William Holden (and a negligible [1995 remake](#) with Harrison Ford, Julia Ormond and Greg Kinnear) gave people the wrong idea about the play, says Paul Tetreault, the director of Ford's.

"It's sort of a confection. It's just really delightful. It's smart and it's witty and it's charming in ways that the movie couldn't be, because they were being sort of forced to make an event" for Bogart, Hepburn and Holden, says Tetreault. Tom Story will play the dissolute younger brother. Stephen Rayne, who staged last season's "The Heavens Are Hung in Black," will direct.

Last year's new staging of "A Christmas Carol" (Nov. 20, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011), adapted by Michael Wilson and starring Ed Gero as Scrooge, will take a second bow at holiday time, again with Michael Baron directing. Foote's "The Carpetbagger's Children" (Jan. 21-Feb. 13, 2011), which ran off-Broadway in 2002 (Quotidian Theatre Company in Bethesda did it in 2007), is a monologue-rich memory play in which three adult sisters recall their family history. They are truly the children of a carpetbagger -- an iron-willed Union soldier who settled in Texas after the Civil War and forbade his daughters to marry. Ford's associate director Mark Ramont will stage it.

"Liberty Smith" (March 23-May 21, 2011) has music by Michael Weiner, lyrics by Adam Abraham and book by Marc Madnick, Eric R. Cohen and Abraham. Ford's has been nurturing the show in workshop, says Tetreault. Liberty, explains Tetreault, is sort of a cross between Zelig and Forrest Gump. He keeps turning up at key moments in the founding of the nation. "We've been dancing with this show for five years. Each reading has gotten stronger, better," says Tetreault, who cites a "problematic" script that kept the show's authors busy with revisions. "Two years ago we did a reading that was just really outstanding. We felt like the script was finally where it needed to be. . . . It's perfect for us. It's historical, but not serious. I think it's going to be a stunning piece."

Sophie's choices

In researching her new solo play about the multitalented and troubled writer Sophie Treadwell, dramatist Allyson Currin had to go against some of her own tastes. "Treadwell: Bright and Dark" is at Arlington's Theatre on the Run through June 19. It's part of American Century Theater's Robert M. McElwaine American Reflections Project.

Treadwell (1885-1970) is best known as the author of the 1928 expressionist drama "Machinal," inspired by the execution of Ruth Snyder and her lover for murdering Snyder's husband. But Treadwell wrote many plays, as

well as fiction and advocacy journalism in an era when few women were doing any of that. She interviewed Mexican bandit Pancho Villa and covered World War I at the front. She sued actor John Barrymore for "borrowing" from a script she had sent him. She had an on-again off-again marriage and a passionate affair with artist Maynard Dixon.

Currin says Treadwell proved "a tough nut to crack, I have to say. She was a gifted writer. Her short stories are my favorite. . . . I found her difficult, though, because she's not funny, and comedy is my currency." Indeed, Currin's plays, whether for adults or children, are often outright comedies or at least dramedies. Before "Treadwell: Bright and Dark" she scripted a new musical based on the Brothers Grimm tale "The Dancing Princesses," which just closed at Imagination Stage, and she wrote "Unleashed! The Secret Lives of White House Pets" for the Kennedy Center's family theater series. Her adult works include "Church of the Open Mind" and "Learning Curves."

Treadwell, says Currin, "had some stinging humor here and there, and certainly irony, but . . . I have that sense of the importance of comedy and she really didn't. That was the biggest bridge I had to build from me to her." For Currin and actress Melissa Flaim, who plays Treadwell, the key to their subject was the "blue devils," or brainstorms that would periodically scramble her thoughts and derail her life. Treadwell checked herself into asylums with regularity. The play is intended to be a flight of memory while she stays at a favorite one in Vienna.

Currin says she used an outburst by Treadwell's lead character in "Machinal" as a model -- "as some kind of way into Sophie's illness. And I think all the voices coming in too fast . . . having your own thoughts just race away from you or race into you . . . maybe it was anxiety."

Flaim and Currin both see strength in Treadwell's illness. Says Flaim, "She always recovered. She never attempted suicide. She kind of went away and rested and fought back and always got better." There was an old photo, says Flaim, that also helped her find the character: "Her shoulders are really straight and she's looking directly at the camera and her hair is pulled back. . . . It's just this very serene, direct gaze. There's such calm in the photo, and yet you can tell there's so much life in the photo. There was always this sense of containment, that she was containing so much."

Horwitz is a freelance writer.