

The Last Starfighter

When Playbill first published the story that there was going to be something called "The Last Starfighter, The Musical," there were within days thousands of internet pick-ups for the story. Two days after the Playbill item appeared, a google search for "last starfighter the musical" turned up over 6,000 references to the Playbill story, ranging from Fox news to SciFi.com to slashdot.com. Our musical stager and choreographer, Jennifer Paulson Lee, walked into rehearsals one day and said her relatives in the Midwest had heard about our little show on TV!

Now slashdot.com turned out to live up to its "slasher" name, at least as far as our show was concerned. They parodied one of the screenplay's most famous exchanges - "We've been hit. We're locked into the moon's gravitational pull. What do we do?" "We die!" - and rewrote the sequence imagining a so-called "Storm Theatre serious artist #1" saying "We're doing a musical called The LAST STARFIGHTER. We'll be a laughing stock in the not-for-profit theater industry. What do we do?" And Storm Theatre serious artist #2 saying "We die!" as the theater building implodes. We gave the appearance of taking it in good fun. But in the back of our minds, we found ourselves worrying not only about how the musical would be received by the New York theater community, but very much about what the science fiction community would say about their beloved work's screenplay being adapted.

The night of October 15, 2004 turned out to be a magical one. We had been nervous about opening with no preview period, but that was the Storm Theatre's custom, so we went with it. Fans of the movie from all over the country - from Albuquerque, Boston, Denver, San Francisco and more - were there (and thank God, a few friends, too). Then we heard that the SciFi Channel's website had sent a critic that night, to our first public performance. Yikes!

The opening number went quite well. In order to make the show a feasible property as a stage musical, we had reimagined the story as the trailer park residents retelling and "acting out" the story for a group of spectators who had come by in response to word-of-mouth accounts of what had happened at the Starlite Starbrite Trailer Park. And our audience seemed ready to go along for the ride. We knew they were completely with us when there was actually hefty applause on one of the screenplay's (and show's) earlier lines, when the kids are going off to the lake leaving Alex to his chores, and the nastiest of the kids shouts out "Bye, bye, Rogan" as in the movie. At that point, I was able to sit back with them and enjoy our first performance, our first preview, our opening night.

Business that first weekend was quite good, a substantial bit ahead of what the Storm Theatre usually managed to bring in, and likewise the following Monday and Tuesday. But the science fiction community, led by that critic from the SciFi Channel site, began to

take notice, and we became a bonafide hit, playing to capacity at every performance, even having to turn away people. (A couple of very supportive sci-filing bloggers, Jason Scott and Connor Dickie, also took it upon themselves to get out there and spread the word.) The musical theater community followed, as postings began to appear on various theater internet sites. One mother and son, who had come from Washington DC without tickets, actually sat in the lobby just listening to the show (we were out in the lobby with them since the artistic director had gently but firmly asked Skip and me to give up our seats to accommodate the crowds), and after each number, the mother and son would applaud in our direction.

Why THE LAST STARFIGHTER, people have asked us. Well, watching the film, the first half-hour or so really felt like a musical, with elements of CINDERELLA (the boy not being allowed to go to the lake because of his chores), THE WIZARD OF OZ (the boy being discontented with his current place and yearning to be somewhere else, in the case of Starfighter, at a college far away from the trailer park), DAMN YANKEES (a stranger offering the boy fame and fortune in exchange for giving up his current existence) and TOMMY (the boy being a whiz at a video game and that whiz-dom leading to something unusual happening in his life). Then, with Robert Preston, in full MUSIC MAN mode, taking the boy to an Oz-like far-away land, the musical possibilities became clear. It was with some amusement that we looked back at the New York Times review of the film, and saw that the caption to critic Lawrence Van Gelder's 1984 review was GREAT GRANDSON OF OZ.

I set about adapting the story into something stage-worthy and drafted a songless script for the first act. I showed it to Skip, intending to present it at the BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop to find songwriters, but happily, Skip decided that it would be perfect for his sensibilities. He had just received great reviews for his score for the San Diego production of the sci-fi/fantasy musical TIME AND AGAIN, and it seemed like fate - certain elements of the stories had so much in common: the young man dissatisfied with his life, a mysterious man appearing to offer him an alternative, and being taken away to a distant place only imaginable in the world of science fiction. It seemed like a natural fit.

Jonathan Betuel, the original screenwriter, had retained the stage rights to his original script. His representatives had been impressed that Skip had been entrusted with musicalizing Jack Finney's TIME AND AGAIN, even more so when they read the California reviews, so they took the request for the rights very seriously, asking to listen to some of Skip's work. Jonathan Betuel responded within days that he was interested in pursuing the discussions. Adding to the merriment was that Betuel sent the original script of THE LAST STARFIGHTER to us, and there, on the first page, was the indication that

this match-up was fated to happen: In the original script, the lead character's name was actually Skip. (Betuel changed it to Alex before filming started, since Betuel's own son was named Alex.)

With the rights to adapting the screenplay pretty much secure and basically in the hands of agents and lawyers, I began presenting my work at the BMI Workshop. I remember Maury Yeston saying excitedly, "You are going to do the scene where Robert Preston gets the kid in the car and the car takes off, aren't you?" This was before CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG had made easy (though expensive) work of flying vehicles on stage, but my nervous response was that we'll have to find a way of doing it within the budgetary constraints of our venue, but of course, the fans of the movie wouldn't forgive us if we left that scene out.

We set about looking at various means of accomplishing the special effects economically, and started devouring information on projections and screens. But most important, we concentrated on the writing, with continued encouragement from the BMI Workshop members and Maury, Jean Banks and Nancy Golladay (who ran the BMI Librettists Workshop) leaving us convinced that if the proverbial "it" is there in the material, a production team will come up with a way, some way, of doing the effects.

Which happily leads us to the Storm Theatre. Skip had worked with the Storm Theatre's artistic director Peter Dobbins on acclaimed revivals of SPOKESONG and A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, leading to Peter's interest in tackling LAST STARFIGHTER. Skip's and my agent, Patricia McLaughlin of Beacon Artists Agency, brought the extraordinary Jennifer Paulson Lee into the project through synergistic agenting, and the process began. Video projections turned out to be beyond the theater's budget, but set designer Todd Ivins came up with an elegant solution of panels which turned seamlessly to take the audience from the trailer park to outer space, with a split stage when scenes called for action happening in both.

And if I'm remembering correctly, it was our assistant director Robert "Mac" McMaster who said at an early production meeting that since the trailer park people are telling the story, it might be loads of fun for the innocent-looking picnic table to suddenly become the car that Cenaturi takes off in with Alex. Todd Ivins put the picnic table on wheels, and, along with Skip and me, Peter and Jennifer expanded on that idea to make that picnic table everything from a flying car to a spaceship to a young boy's bed to, well, when the situation called for it, an actual picnic table.

We were ready to get on with the process of actually putting on the Storm Theatre's world premiere production of THE LAST STARFIGHTER, A NEW MUSICAL. It became one of the happiest experiences of our professional lives, and we're grateful to all who made the production and this CD possible.

THE LAST STARFIGHTER | Synopsis

The Starlite Starbrite Trailer Park in the Sierra Nevadas, Eastern California, May 1983. Otis, the owner of the general store, welcomes a group of spectators (us, the audience) who have come to the trailer park to hear the story of what happened a month earlier, when there were tabloid reports about spaceship and alien sightings. The trailer park residents join in: They want to set the record straight and be known not as a phony UFO site, but as the place where Alex and Maggie left for the stars. **(Starlite Starbrite)**

They take us back to a month earlier, to April 1983. Eighteen-year-old Alex Rogan is kept from going to the lake with his girlfriend Maggie and the other teenagers by the chores he's stuck doing around Starlite Starbrite. As the day passes, Alex dreams of being somebody who goes somewhere and does something – anything, as long as it's away from Starlite Starbrite. **(Somebody, Somewhere, Something)**

Otis reflects on appreciating the small pleasures in life. **(A Place Like This)** Maggie returns from the lake, followed by Blake, the spoiled rich kid from town. Alex's twelve-year-old brother Louis notices that Alex has gotten up to 300,000 on the Starfighter video game. By 1983 video game standards, not to mention Starlite Starbrite Trailer Park standards, that's mighty impressive, so Otis and Louis gather the residents of the park to cheer Alex on as he goes for the record. **(Little Did We Know – The Game)**

Maggie expresses reluctance about going with Alex when he leaves for college, claiming that her Granny can't take care of herself. Meanwhile, Alex's mother brings a letter saying that Alex's hoped-for ticket out of the trailer park, a college loan, has been denied. Heartbroken and angry, Alex runs off to the Starfighter machine, the only place he feels in control. Otis tries to reassure him. **(Things Change)**

Alex tries to turn off the Starfighter machine before going back to the trailer, but the machine starts making strange noises. Suddenly, a stranger appears in a car – a stranger who sounds mysteriously like the voice of the announcer in the Starfighter video game. It is Centauri, who proves to Alex that he actually is the inventor of Starfighter, and invites Alex to take a ride with him to discuss an opportunity that could make them both famous. Alex thinks it's a chance to make some money to escape to college, and – convinced that Centauri is actually who he says he is – gets into the car. At Centauri's request, Alex shakes the hand of a darkly clad man called Beta, who then scurries out of the car. As they ride, Alex is stunned when, to avoid an accident, the car takes off into the air and out of Earth's atmosphere into space. He's then stunned again when Centauri reveals himself to be a lizard-like creature with two extra eyes in back of his head. Centauri promises Alex that the planet Rylos, the world in the video game, is real and is calling with the prospect of fortune and glory. **(Out of This World)**

Like a fish out of water, Alex joins a group of Starfighter recruits as Enduran, the leader of Rylos and father of the enemy Zur, leads the recruits in an anthem of alliance to defend all civilizations. **(Star League Anthem)** Alex meets Grig, Centauri's

brother, who admonishes Centauri for bringing an Earth person to be a Starfighter recruit. Grig observes that Centauri has tried to get Earth involved for his own financial gain, but Centauri points out that Alex is a natural for intergalactic battle, as proven by his performance on the Starfighter game. Centauri assures Alex that there's no danger for someone with Alex's abilities, but he promises to take Alex back whenever Alex wants.

They are interrupted by an incoming broadcast of a hologram – it is Zur, vowing revenge on his father Enduran for denying him his rightful succession to Enduran's throne, a right Enduran has given away in an effort to save Rylos and turn it into a democracy. Zur demonstrates his power by torturing (and little by little killing) the spy Gnur, whom Enduran had sent to watch him, warning Enduran that Zur has spies as well. **(Father to Son)** Then Zur – the only member of the Ko-Dan Armada who knows the coordinates of the Starfighter base – orders the base's destruction.

Back on Earth, it turns out that Centauri has left Beta behind (remember the handshake in the car) to take Alex's place at Starlite Starbrite. But though the simuloid looks and sounds just like Alex, he messes up even the simplest of chores, not to mention every moment alone with Maggie. Beta confuses Maggie when she tries to let him know that she's decided to go with him (thinking he's Alex) whenever the time comes that he can leave the trailer park. She kisses him and he runs off screaming in pain. (She's shorted Beta's circuitry.) She expresses her disillusionment to her Granny, as well as to Mrs. Rogan and their pistol of a neighbor, Elaine. The three ladies share their thoughts on the nature of love. **(Love is Like Water)**

Alex and Centauri are back on Earth (having left the Starfighter base before Zur destroyed it), but Centauri's car has broken down a few miles from Starlite Starbrite. After Centauri refuses Alex's offer of help with the car, Alex decides to walk the rest of the way home. Centauri offers Alex a crystal to summon Centauri if he changes his mind about joining the Starfighters' fight. Alex at first refuses it, but Centauri expresses the need for Alex to find his potential. **(To Make a Hero)** Alex still leaves but reluctantly takes the crystal with him.

Louis takes over the telling of the story to the audience. Louis relates how his dream of being with one of the centerfolds from his extensive Playboy collection was rudely interrupted by a Zandozan, a foul-smelling hit-man creature who was sent to find Alex and kill him. But the Zandozan is stymied by there being two Alexes, both the Beta unit and the real Alex. The Zandozan takes over the bodies of the trailer park residents one by one, until Centauri (summoned by the real Alex tapping the crystal) appears and shoots the Zandozan, as the trailer park residents sing, "a Zandozan, dead through and through." **(Zandozan!)**

But the Zandozan isn't dead; it stirs and wounds Centauri. Showing the same amazing reflex ability that makes him a winner at the Starfighter game, Alex grabs and shoots Centauri's gun, and this time the Zandozan is really dead. Centauri warns Alex that he's not safe on Earth - that once Zur finds out Alex is alive, there will be Zandozans crawling all

over Earth hunting him down. As the first act ends, Alex faces a choice of either going back into space or living a life of fear on Earth. **(To Make a Hero - Reprise)**

Act II opens with the teenagers at the lake. Beta, still subbing for Alex, is continually perplexed by the whole "love and teenager thing – guess Centauri forgot to deal with that in the programming," Otis explains to the audience. Teenage hijinks ensue, with Maggie getting increasingly frustrated with Beta/Alex. Beta overhears bad-boy Blake's comings-on to Jenny and decides to mimic Blake's smooth moves. This just gets Beta in more hot water with Maggie, until a Zandozan appears. The Zandozan fires at Beta, after which Beta reveals his sparking shorted circuitry to Maggie, and both the Zandozan and Maggie realize that Beta is not Alex. The Zandozan runs off to alert Zur; Beta and Maggie run off in Blake's truck to stop the Zandozan. **(Spring Break)**

Beta crashes Blake's truck into the Zandozan's spaceship before the Zandozan can finish transmitting its message to Zur. The audience sees the fiery crash in the shining light of the explosion and the terror on Maggie's face. Maggie calls out to Alex with her fear that they might never be together again. Alex, who along with Centauri has been enlisted to fly a Gunstar against Zur in Alex's capacity as "the last Starfighter," is in a hangar on Rylos getting ready, promising to move heaven and Earth to be together with her again and keep her and Earth safe and free. **(Reach Out)**

Enduran encourages Alex and Centauri as they board the Gunstar, joined in song by the people of Rylos, interspersed with the trailer park residents joining the story of the battle. After several setbacks, Alex manages to destroy Zur's ship. **(Caves of the Heart – The Battle)** But several of Zur's most ardent disciples manage to escape, so after the battle, Enduran and Grig plead with Alex to stay on to help rebuild the Starfighter forces.

Centauri brings Alex back to Earth to ask Maggie to come with him to Rylos. Maggie asks Granny what she should do, and Granny just says, "Don't forget to write, or whatever it is you do up there." Centauri assures everyone that Maggie and Alex will be back to visit, and the three of them take off. And the trailer park residents finish the telling of the story by saying people will be talking about this place, Starlite Starbrite Trailer Park, for years to come as the place where Alex and Maggie left for the stars. **(Finale)**