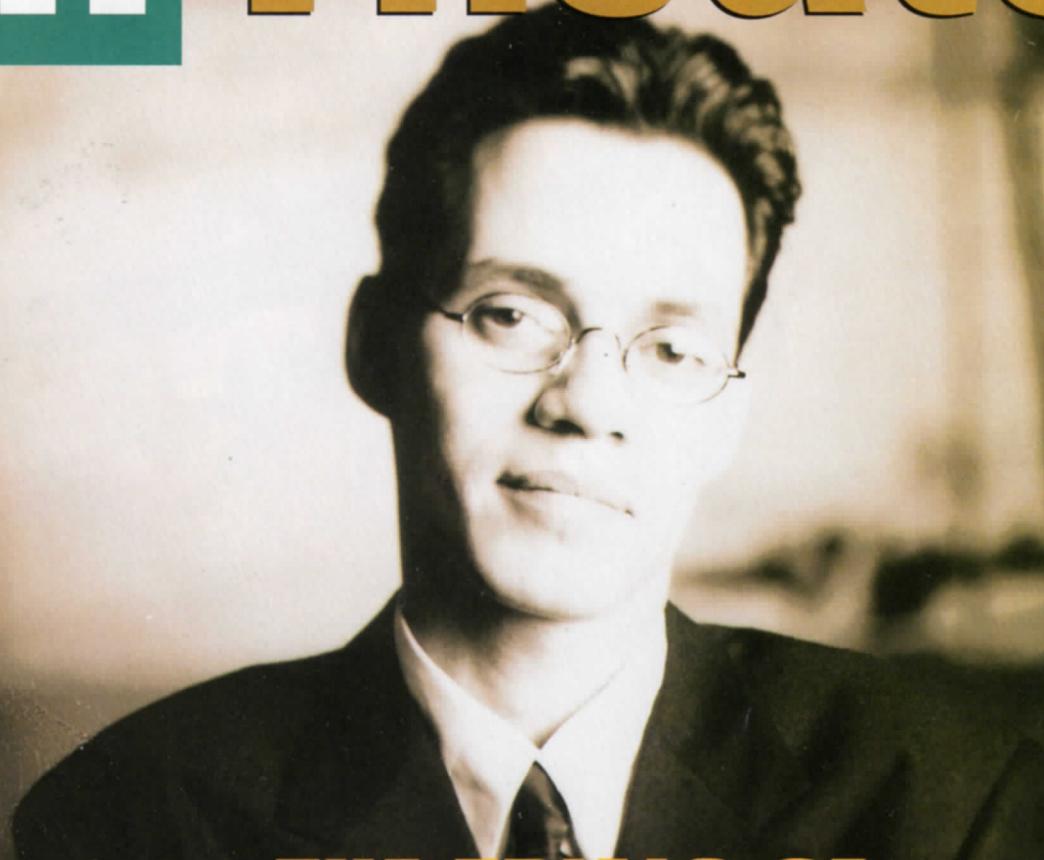


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THE TRIALS OF
THE CAPEMAN

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Defending

THE CAPEMAN

As Paul Simon's first Broadway show delays its opening by three weeks, insiders are asking, "Can this musical make it?"

By Paul Wontorek

Photographs by Joan Marcus

"The musical inspired by headlines...*inspires* headlines." The sign was put up outside the Marquis Theatre as *The Capeman*, Paul Simon's \$11 million musical opus, began previews in early December. It was the truth — and the ultimate boast for a Broadway show. After all, in these days of minimal coverage for theater, a show almost has to be as controversial as *The Capeman* to get noticed nationally. The early headlines *were* inspired: The Umbrella Man

Speaks! Victims' Families Fume! Controlling Pop Star Perils Show! The musical even has a string of firings in its past: theater folks like leading lady Priscilla Lopez and directors number one and two, Susana Tubert

(an Argentine-born up-and-comer) and Eric Simonson (*The Song of Jacob Zulu*). But these problems had been well documented and appeared to be things of the past.

Now, as the show enters its second

the time the musical in Simon's mind for almost a decade finally opens on January 29 (a three-week delay from its planned opening date), it will be battling not only the critics, but its troubled reputation.



The Capeman ensemble celebrates the "Puerto Rican Day Parade."

The complaints run the gamut. On one hand, friends of the late Salvador Agron — played by Marc Anthony as a teen and Ruben Blades as an adult — who served 20 years in prison for stabbing two teenage boys to death in a Hell's Kitchen playground in the

month of previews, it's back in the papers. But this time around, reports have centered on more immediate concerns: tepid audience response, dropped songs, and an overwhelmed first-time director, Mark Morris. By

summer of 1959, claim that the true Agron isn't anywhere to be found on the stage of the Marquis. At the same time, relatives of the Capeman's murder victims have staged protests outside the theater (and promise to return



Marc Anthony faces the death penalty as young Sal.

for the opening), crying that a story about a murderer redeeming himself glorifies the crimes.

Nobody ever said it would be easy to make a musical out of a tabloid

murder from '50s New York City. When Paul Simon first approached Nobel Prize-winning West Indian author and poet Derek Walcott about the project, Walcott was surprised at the suggestion. "I thought it would be extremely challenging for Broadway," he says. "I always associate Broadway with an upbeat kind of formula. Even when something is

supposed to be daring, it's normally safe in its daring."

What Walcott really struggled with was Simon's take on Agron — a man who drew the ire of New York City for his initial lack of regret regarding his crimes. Walcott admits that he hated the guy at first. "I had a very difficult time understanding Paul's positive attitude towards him," he says. "I resented it in a way." What changed things for Walcott was reading the words of the criminal-turned-poet. "His poetry wasn't very good," he says, "but Agron wrote incredible journals. I became interested in his moral stance and the idea that he was a result of his background: the prejudice, the pressures, the contempt. This child was supposed to be American, but in a way, he became a second-rate citizen."

While those sentiments aren't exactly revolutionary (after all, isn't this what the Sharks and Jets complained about to Office Krupke?), Walcott and Simon have included a generous helping of emotional baggage from Agron's life. In the first act, we see Sal's father leaving him as a child in Puerto Rico, his mother crying helplessly over a doomsaying fortune teller, his stepfa-



Ednita Nazario (Esmerelda) sings "Sal's Last Song" with Ruben Blades (Agron).



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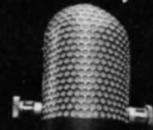
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Author Derek Walcott describes Act Two as "more spiritual than factual."



Esmerelda (Nazario) looks to a higher power to save her son.

ther reprimanding him with religious fervor, his gang luring him into acts of crime. But what really seems to fascinate the authors is the show's more abstract second act, which shows the adult Salvador trying to better himself. "The second part of the show is different," says Walcott. "It's more spiritual than factual."

In fact, according to Agron's real friends, the second act becomes downright questionable. "I really think Simon is in over his head here," says Fred Newman, the Artistic Director of the Castillo Theater and former therapist and friend of Agron. "What he's trying to do is use this terribly sensitive, complex political story as a platform for his music. That creates bad theater in both directions." Simon contacted Newman when he was researching the story years ago, but it became apparent to Newman that he wasn't telling Simon what the composer wanted to hear. In order to beat *The Capeman* to the punch, Newman wrote his own show about his friend called *Salvador* (Fictional

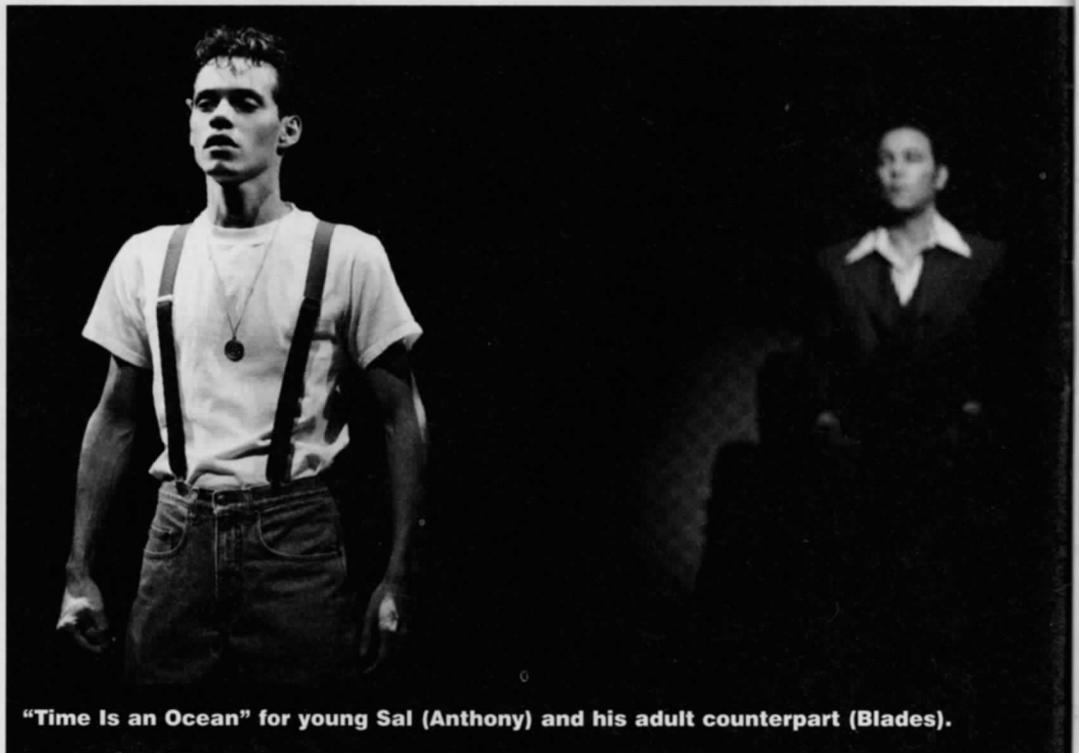
Conversations). It was produced at the Castillo earlier last fall. In the script, Agron says, "Maybe Simon will do a musical about me. There's lotsa Puerto Rican sounds he could rip off."

Newman's vision of his old friend couldn't be more different from Simon's. In *Salvador*, Agron is a sexually charged and sarcastic man with a passion for the Communist party. "Becoming a Communist in prison was fundamental with Sal," Newman says. "That's what saved him. He was a product of the '60s in a way, from his jail cell." Agron is also seen slowly deteriorating in his days outside of the penitentiary, until his death at age 42 in 1986 from pneumonia. "He started losing a lot of weight," says Newman. "He was becoming gaunt. And Sal was a very strong man. He looked like someone using drugs. I wouldn't be surprised if he had AIDS."

Although it may seem odd that the musical leaves many of these details untouched, key figures defend the show's angle. "I don't know that Sal

used drugs," says Walcott. "There's a potential, the possibility that he died a drug addict, etc. All I know is that he ended his life in a solitary way." Ednita Nazario, who plays Agron's mother, says, "This is not a documentary. We've had the liberty to interpret the characters as we see fit. If we would portray his life truthfully, the play would have to last 43 years. The essence is there; the story that the authors wanted to present."

But is the story true to the man? Does it matter? While many have complained that Simon is perpetuating the image of Latinos as knife-wielding gang bangers (and shoplifting do-woppers), is it actually possible that the story is whitewashing Agron's real life? *Capeman* producer Edgar Dobie says that fears from Latino groups and victims' families should be settled once they actually see the piece. "I invite people to continue their protest after they've taken the time to see the show," he says. "Paul is enormously respectful of the whole



"Time Is an Ocean" for young Sal (Anthony) and his adult counterpart (Blades).

Puerto Rican community and wanted to make sure the show was faithful."

Dobie disputes rumors of a production out of control. "We've been working on the first act," he says, "cutting a couple of songs and keeping a tight show together. Now, we're focusing on the second act. It was our plan all along." Despite press reports (like the November *New York Times Magazine* cover story) that paint Simon as the ultimate anti-collaborator, and rumors that claim Mike Nichols and Nicholas Hytner have been summoned to doctor the show, Dobie says the current creative team remains in place, working hard to fix the problems. "I'm very pleased by how agile people have been with change," he says. "I'm the one who's had the experience in mounting these things. There's nothing more complex than the musical theater." Indeed, with his background as president of The Really Useful Company, Dobie has been painted as one of the level-headed theater folk who stepped in early to get things under control. But according to the *Times* piece, he's also the man who decided to ax the show's Chicago tryout, a move that is now being looked on with raised eyebrows.

What *The Capeman* really needs at this point is good reviews. The show's \$4 million advance could dry up quickly if the critics concur with the word-of-mouth. "I'm just worried about focusing the show," says Dobie. "I think you can give yourself insomnia trying to second guess what the critics are gonna do. I'm confident that they'll recognize the qualities that are there. The show's got a number of strengths, starting with Paul's score."

Ultimately what may affect the final word is Simon himself. The image of a pop star trying to fight the Broadway system isn't exactly endearing to those who make a life in the theater — although in the end, the show will speak for itself. As for Simon's image, his leading lady can't believe the fuss. "Why wouldn't he want to be in control?" asks Ednita Nazario. "He'd be a fool if he wasn't! It's only a guarantee for the audience. He's going to make this show the best that he can." ■

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