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APRIL 15, 2012

S.I. native rocks the 'Cradle of Aviation'

The borough's little-known airborne history finally gets its due in new book

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Staten Island has enough airborne history to call itself a "Cradle of Aviation," according to pilot-turned-historian Ed Drury.

But as it happens, Long Island snagged the catchy title years ago for its Cradle of Aviation Museum in Uniondale.

Drury's "Staten Island: The Other Cradle of Aviation" (Icarus Press, \$15.95), 143-page illustrated history with 100-plus photos, makes a plausible case for sharing the concept.

It's partly a personal account. The author, whose father was a pilot, grew up in Meiers Corners and New Dorp and took his first flying lesson at the Staten Island Airport at 14, he said last week.

He's been flying ever since. "I've amassed over 5,000 hours of flying time, some in the Air Force, but mostly as a machinery buyer in the eastern half of the US. I still own and fly a twin Cessna."

When he started the book, he assumed he knew the history pretty thoroughly, but found he had much to learn.

Q: Borough historian Thomas Matteo has looked into local aviation history, as have others. But you made some discoveries, didn't you?

A: I was surprised to learn that there were at least 21 landing sites on the island and that the Wittemann Factory in Sunnyside was the first airplane factory in the country. The number of seaplane bases also surprised me.

Q: Planes were manufactured locally in several plants, Wittemann, Rex, and others. Why did that business fade?

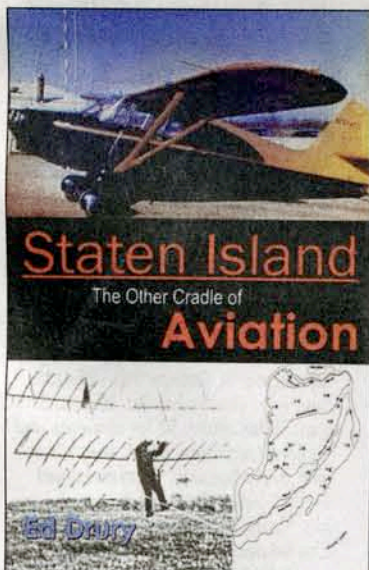
A: The Wittemann factory was moved to Newark and then to Teterboro for more space. The Rex plant moved to upstate NY. Bellanca was offered free space in Delaware where they made airplanes until about 1975, and the Fernic plant closed with the death of its owner.

In the end, airport land became too valuable and the airports were sold off for retail or industrial development.

Q: Some people, like Andy Origilia in Rosebank, built their own planes in their backyards. Is that advisable?

A: Andy was the head mechanic for Staten Island Airport and one of the last of

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Drury's book



Strike force: Lysistrata (center, played by Danielle Dallacco) and her crew.

REINVENTING THE 'WHEEL'

Wagner College has a world premiere in the wings:
A new musical by 'Hair' composer Galt MacDermot

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

'Goddess Wheel," a new musical by Galt MacDermot and Matty Selman, arrives Wednesday in a Wagner College production after a whopping 2,401-year gestation.

Like the recently shuttered "Lysistrata Jones" on Broadway, "Goddess Wheel" is based on the 411 BC comedy (Aristophanes) in which a war-weary Athenian, Lysistrata, convinces her like-minded friends and kinswomen to declare a sex strike until their men end the long-running Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC).

Sight unseen, the project is already remarkable on several levels. At Wagner, it's a huge, record-setting enterprise. The cast of more than 40 includes a phalanx of campus athletes as belligerent (and notoriously burly) Spartan warriors.

Also, there's this: New musicals by substantial figures like MacDermot



Danielle Dallacco and Matt Sydney.

PHOTOS BY KAREN O'DONNELL

'Goddess Wheel'

Wagner College Theatre Dept. presents a new musical by Galt MacDermot & Matty Selman

Where: The Music Hall at Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden; 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston

When: Wednesdays-Saturdays April 18-28, 8 p.m.; matinees on Saturdays & April 29, 2 p.m.

How much: Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, \$25 and \$22 (seniors); Fridays & Saturdays, \$27 and \$25; children 12 and under, \$16.

More information: Call the box office at 718-390-3259.

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ADVANCE BUZZ

April is poetry month

Author Marguerite Maria Rivas, the borough's de facto poet laureate, will read and sign copies of her new collection, "Tell No One: Poems of Witness" (Chimbarazu Press), Saturday from 2-3:30 p.m. in the Staten Island Museum, 75 Stuyvesant Pl., St. George; www.StatenIslandMuseum.org.



Wagner College has a world premiere in the wings

and Selman, a well-employed writer/composer, do not, as a rule, evolve on local stages or in college drama departments.

Also atypical: Both have Island ties. The composer has lived in Silver Lake since the 1960s. Selman, 61, grew up in West Brighton and attended neighborhood schools.

Finally, and perhaps most striking of all, everyone seems to be getting along, which is almost never the case in the new-musical business. Just check out "Smash," the NBC's new Monday night backstage drama. To-the-death fights erupt in every episode.

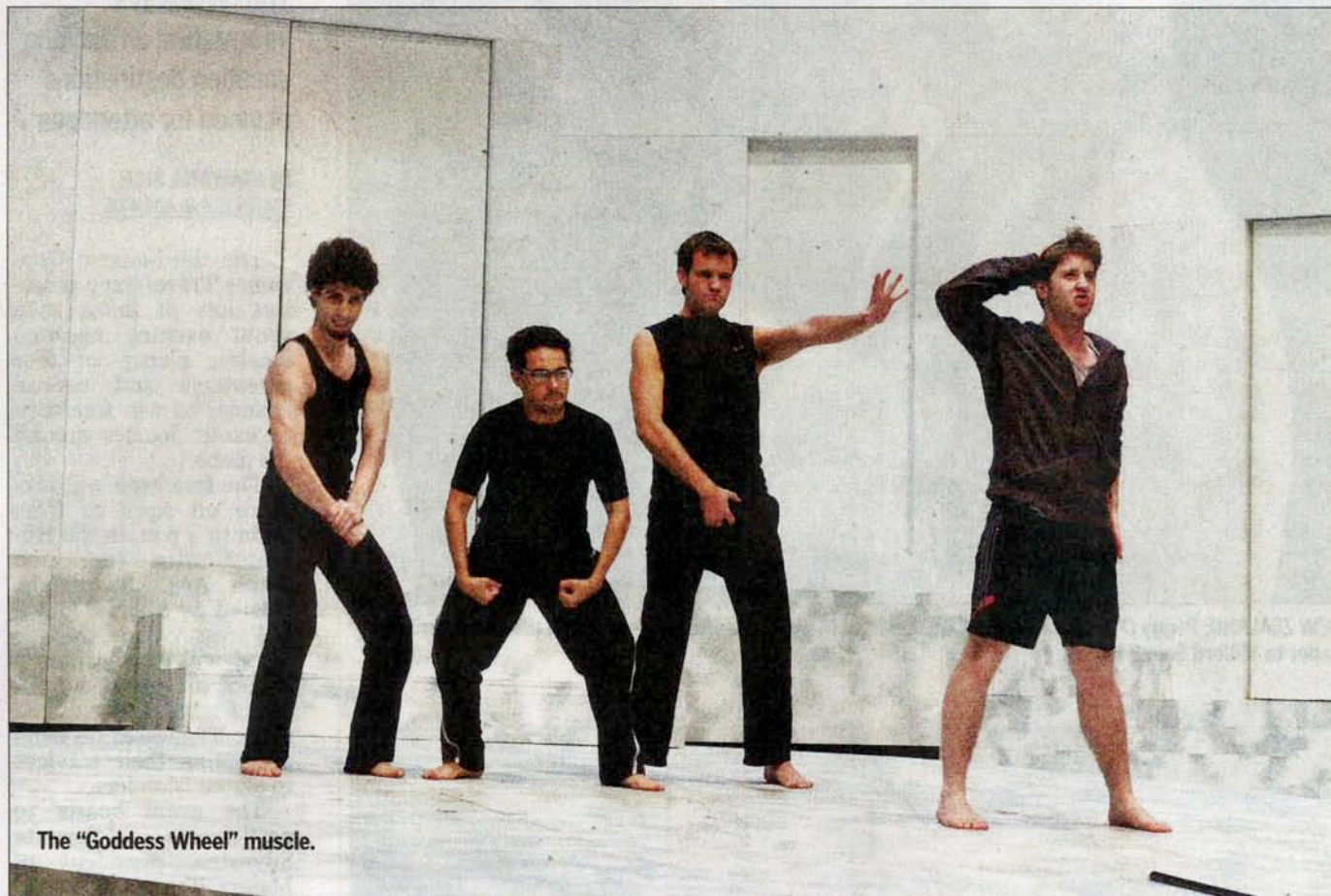
But the composer and lyricist can't say enough about each other's contributions and everyone is applauding director Rusty Curcio's work as well as the efforts of his cast.

CAMBRIDGE CONCEPTION

The "Goddess Wheel" backstory starts a decade ago in Cambridge, Mass., at Harvard, where producer/scholar/critic Robert Brustein asked MacDermot to think about a new project — a musical version of "Lysistrata."

With MacDermot signed on, Brustein proposed Selman as librettist and lyricist. The two met, liked each other and decided they could work together. By late 2002, they had produced songs for more than half a show, a plotline and characters. A workshop at the American Repertory Theatre starred Tony-winner Cherry Jones ("Doubt").

Late in November 2002, the composer presented the material, then called "Beaus and Eros" at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall with his



The "Goddess Wheel" muscle.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KAREN O'DONNELL

New Pulse Jazz Band backing a quartet of singers.

It was a promising start, but there were drawbacks. Last week, MacDermot noted, "You know, we didn't have a second act; the Greeks didn't believe in them. But there were some nice songs and Matty really knows what he's doing."

There were another couple of workshops and then the project went to sleep until 2006, when MacDermot caught Wagner's production of "Hair," directed and choreographed by Rusty Curcio. He liked it so well, he approached Curcio about "Goddess Wheel."

Curcio was equally enthusiastic, but it took time to fit the show — and its extra-large budget — into the calendar.

Over the past few months, it has invaded the theater department's curriculum, Curcio said. "Classes have read several different translations and developed presentations about them."

Creating a character from scratch has offered undergraduate actors a rare opportunity, he explained. "With an existing show, they have a preconceived idea of the character. It's been done. In this project, they get to create it themselves."

MacDermot and Selman (who has written three musi-

cals with "Agnes of God" playwright John Pielmeier) have spent the past few weeks, writing, cutting and rewriting. Late last week, they re-jiggered the ending of the show at the request of the actors.

Again, no one's complaining, in fact Selman says: "Rusty opened up a whole new way of looking at the piece for me ... and as for Galt, his music is so special and rhythmic."

Selman is feeling a little sentimental about having his own work staged by Wagner.

"I had my first theatrical experience at Wagner, as a kid," he said. "It was a 'Man For All Seasons' starring John Carradine."

The "Goddess Wheel" cast: Senior theater major Danielle Dallacco will be Lysistrata, with Leighann Colin as Penelope/Persephone; Ilana Bolotsky as Young Widow; Tara Kirk and Ashley Burger as Women of Sparta; Caroline LaTorre, Heather Kirschenbauer and Erica Weiderlight as Goddesses.

Also, Matt Sydney as the Chancellor; Ryan Cole as the Spartan Envoy/Soldier Ghost; and Andrew Khouri and Matt Favetta as Men of Athens. John Jamiel, head of acting in the department, will play Oracle/Hates.

Michael J. Fressola is the arts critic for the Advance. He may be reached at fressola@siadvance.com.