

Playwright Rea is ecstatic over 'TUSK'

Norman Rea couldn't be happier.

Despite taking a fall earlier this week that left him with bruised ribs at his home in Rexford, the smile that's been on Rea's face for the past few weeks is still there.

"I feel like I've hit the lottery," said Rea, a lyricist whose play, "TUSK," was selected for inclusion in the New York Musical Theater Festival Sept. 13 to Oct. 4 in Manhattan.

"To get to this level is such an honor. I'm still flabbergasted."

"TUSK" was first performed last September at The Egg at the Empire State Plaza in Albany. Part of the New York/New Works initiative designed to help local artists develop new plays, "TUSK" was one of 18 shows selected from more than 200 submissions to earn a spot in the New York Musical Theater Festival lineup.

While the New York production will be performed by pro-

SPOTLIGHT



fessional Equity actors, the original local cast will do one final cabaret/concert performance of "TUSK" on Tuesday at the Malt River Brewing Company in Latham at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$25.

"I really have to hand it to the local cast, because it was their CD recording that we sent to Manhattan that the festival panel liked so much," said Rea. "It was their voices and their sound that got us in. So I think that's quite a compliment to our local performers."

Rea, a Capital Region native who owned his own marketing firm in New York City for 25 years before moving back to the area five years ago, wrote the two-hour musical along with Steven Billing and Steven Yu-



Norman Rea, at the piano, and Steven Billings are the creators of the musical "TUSK," which was selected for inclusion in the New York Musical Theater Festival.

hasz, with additional music from David Salih and Craig Strang.

"I co-wrote the story with Steven Billings, and then we brought Steve Yuhasz into the project, and he added a lot of layers and helped us get it off the page and onto the stage," said Rea. "Steve is directing it in New York, and Bryan Sommers is our composer. They're both plugged into New York and handling all the auditions right now."

"TUSK" is the story of a family of elephants, and follows

SPAC pops concert a snappy offering

By BILL RICE
Gazette Reporter

MUSIC REVIEW

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Soprano songbird Jami Rogers starred in a Philadelphia Orchestra pops concert at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center on Friday night.

With Erich Kunzel, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops, on the podium, it was a wonderful evening in three-quarter time.

The concert opened with a snappy and lilting performance of Johann Strauss Jr.'s Overture to "Die Fledermaus." It closed with his father's rousing "Radetzky" March.

In between was a mix of waltzes, polkas, overtures and arias, with Rogers delighting the audience in several vocal segments.

This was the soprano's second engagement in Saratoga Springs this summer. In July, she sang in a Lake George Opera production of Bernstein's "Candide" in the Spa Little Theatre.

The first time out, she put personality-plus into her lilting version of "Mein Herr Marquis" from "Die Fledermaus" — along with all the coloratura runs and high notes.

Rogers came back later in the first half with a dark-toned and sultry performance of Lehar's "Meine Lippen, sie kussen so heiss," from the operetta "Giuditta."

During the second half, she was heard in a wonderfully lyrical performance of "Vilja" from Lehar's "The Merry Widow" and a ravishing "Voices of Spring" from

The orchestra touched on most of the familiar Strauss pieces, "Wine, Women and Song" and "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" among them. The orchestra played the waltzes "concert style," that is, as Kunzel explained, with all the changes in tempo that would have been omitted at a Viennese ball.

A pops specialist, he is certainly at home with music of this type, going after every little nuance and accent in an animated manner. And with this orchestra, he certainly got what he went after.

Other concert highlights included a fast-paced "Thunder and Lightning" Polka, a "Perpetuum Mobile" which showed off the facility of every section of the orchestra and Lehar's "Sirens of the Ball" Waltz, based on themes from "The Merry Widow."

The first half closed on a humorous note with a protest song, the finale from Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony.

When it was first performed, members left the stage in small groups as a hint to Haydn's boss, Prince Esterhazy, that they needed more vacation time.

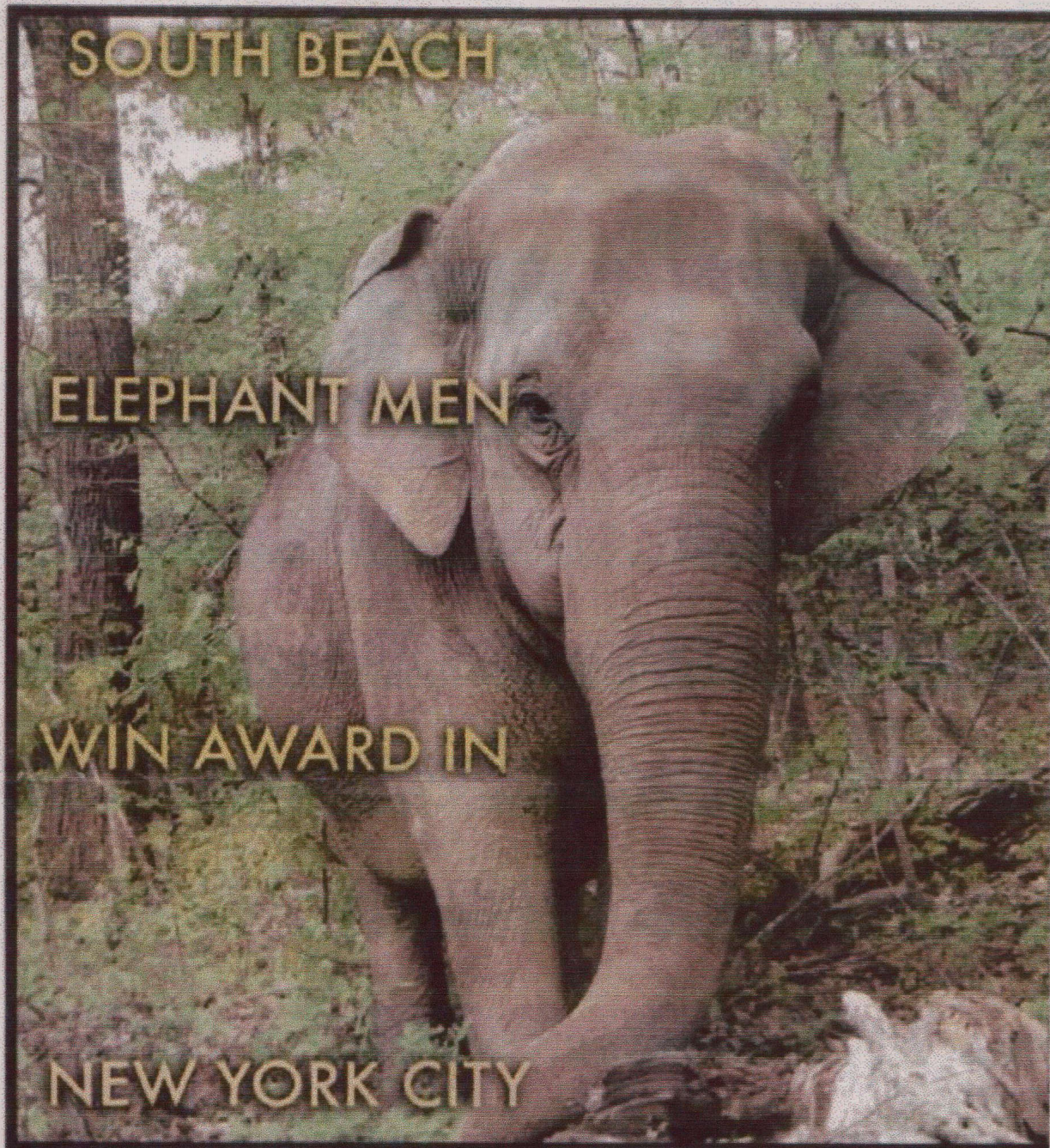
The exit was repeated in this performance, but the musicians were back for a lively second half.

Tonight, pianist Yefim Bronfman will perform Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 with Charles Dutoit and the Philadelphians. The program will also include Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, the

JERICO DRIVE-IN 767-3398
4 miles south of Albany on Rt. 9W
FRI. & SAT. 8:35 & 12:20, SUN. 8:35
(MATT DAMON) THE BOURNE SUPREMACY (PG-13)
ALSO 10:25 "I ROBOT" (PG-13)

MALTA ROUTE 9 MALTA 587-6077
1 Mile off I-87 exit 13S
DRIVE-IN THEATRE
Nightly at 8:35
BOURNE SUPREMACY (PG13)
ALSO
THE VILLAGE (PG13)

"ONE OF THE FUNNIEST MOVIES OF THE YEAR."
-Richard Roeper, EBERT & ROEPER
FROM THE DIRECTOR OF
JOHN CHO HAROLD & KUMAR GO TO WHITE CASTLE
"DUDE, WHERE'S MY CAR?"



All Elephant photos courtesy of The Elephant Sanct

STORY BY CARL ZABLOTNY

September wasn't a bad month for every resident of South Beach, in spite of all the hurricane evacuations and poor business. While most of us experienced heightened anxiety and confusion, three of our local guys were in New York promoting some local talent — talent of their own, that is. That's Craig Strang, Steven Billing, and David Salih. They were all collaboratively involved in the production of *TUSK*, one of 32 selections in the New York Musical Theatre Festival that took place Sept. 18-30 at the 47th Street Theatre.

Yes, that's right — they didn't go to a circuit party, they didn't dance naked in a gay club — they put their minds together and entered a theatre festival with their creation that had six play dates and won fourth prize overall! Not bad for three local, gay South Beach Boys, huh?

And *TUSK* is such a relevant work that not only addresses the plight of circus elephants, but the plight of everyone. It is a universal story of humanity and survival told by a family of elephants taken from their home in the rainforest and forcibly turned into circus performers. It also shows the parallel between our lives and those of the elephants. *TUSK* is a compelling story of social significance that will challenge your sense of humankind.

The story was told by a company of actors who never became elephants, but engaged the audience through the use of "shadows" and silhouettes. This evocative and powerful musical is an absorbing and thought-provoking journey enhanced by the audience's imagination. The writers even consulted Carol Buckley, Director of The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee during the creation of "*TUSK: A Musical*."



It was just nice to find out that our local boys did so well in New York and received such high critical praise for their contribution to the festival. So Wire wanted to give them credit where credit is due! Here's their story of success and collaboration. These guys are highly talented and incredibly creative! Check out their website, www.justamusical.com, and the theatre website, www.nymt.org. And if you are actually moved by the tale they tell, check out the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee. Just go to www.elephants.com.

This is one time Wire is not embarrassed to talk about elephants or put photos of them here for everyone to see, given the recent election when the elephants stomped on the donkeys!

You're all singers, songwriters. How did you all of a sudden become involved in theatre?

Craig: It was in the spring of 2003 that Steven Billing called me and said he was working on an animated television show for children called the *Wishaphants*. It was about dream-like characters who could wish and have special powers. He asked me to write some children's songs for the show. So I wrote a few songs and met Norman Reis, who was a friend of Steven's. So Steven was kind of the epicenter of this whole project since he knew me, David Salih, and the artist who created the *Wishaphants* series. Not very far into the project we decided to do a more adult like format and that's how *TUSK* was born. Norman said we needed to do something that was more profound. Then we started doing a lot more research and Steven was kind of in charge.

David: I actually go way back in theatre, since I was a boy. I majored in theatre in college, and was very active in the theatre community in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas, which is where I'm from. Since I moved to Miami Beach nine years ago, I decided to focus on my songwriting and producing, and only recently began feeling the ole tug to go back to my roots, so to speak! It's been great getting back into the theatre scene... I've been not only writing for it but going back on stage as well. There's a sense of community and collaboration you don't find in most places.

Steven: I have always loved the theater. I saw an elephant abuse video on the net and could not sleep. I knew it was my calling to do something to expose the truth on what really happens to elephants. A musical would be a perfect way I thought.

Steve, you were one of the writers of the book that *TUSK* was based on, right? Did you see production possibilities there?

Steven: I did see it as production material. I actually hope that someday it will be turned into animation. As much as *Tusk* is a musical it is also an educational piece that I think parents and children can identify with.

Craig: It was the story of elephants and elephant abuse. It really didn't have a title and was still morphing when we got involved. We had more songs than story, but that's what really propelled the project. One of the songs I wrote was called



"The Train to Nowhere," and we knew we wanted to have a scene in the story where the elephants were being chained and shackled and put on trains and taken to their slaughter, wherever they were going, wherever the story was going to take them. Another song I wrote was about the birth of an elephant. That was "Take a Chance on Yourself." It's a feel-good, happy song.

What was the process after that?

Craig: David, Norman, Steven, and myself were sitting on Lincoln Road drinking cosmo's and writing this show! Norman lives in Albany, New York and he took the project there and it was accepted by the Egg Theater where they did one of the first public readings of the show. That was in the summer of 2003. It wasn't much longer afterward that we pulled the story line together. We had to write it over and over again and keep breaking it. My contribution to the show at that time was done.

Steven: I wanted different styles of music in *Tusk*. When I finished the book I contacted David and Craig to see if they wanted to write the music to the lyrics. I have worked with both of them before and I knew how talented each of them is. Both David and Craig put their own style and uniqueness into the songs and that's what I wanted.

David: I wrote the opening and closing songs – "Rainforest" and "Distant Messengers" respectively – as well as the death scene power ballad, "The Beauty in Me" sung by a male elephant who is killed for his tusks. "And so the beauty in me,

traced the tracks of ivory, I'm not the beast you make me out to be. I was born to run wild and free..." contributed all the music for these selections and collaborated on the lyrics.

And how did you decide to enter it in the New York Musical Theatre Festival?

Craig: During the process they brought on the director of the show, Steven Yuhasz. He began to pull the show together and make it a musical. It was also at that time that the New York Musical Theatre Festival was being created and Steven was on the board of directors. We were selected from more than 220 submissions and had six shows during the Festival Sept. 18-30 at the 47th Street Theatre. And after it was all over, we were voted the fourth best musical!

How did you feel being in New York and seeing your work on stage?

Craig: It was my first time to New York City! It was really cathartic for me just being in the city and a part of this musical. It didn't hit me until I sat down and the house lights went down and the show started. I think I cried through the whole first act! It was a really good feeling, it was great to see all that collaborative work between Norman, Steven Yuhasz, Steven Billing, David Salih, and myself with all the actors – it was an amazing feeling, something I've never experienced.

David: I find it very exciting! I mean, having a musical theatre production showing in New York City right near 42nd Street is pretty cool. I think! Everyone in New York City seemed to be very warm and accepting of us South Beach Boys.

Steven: It is fascinating! There is no place like New York. It was an honor for all of us to be in the Big Apple, Off-Broadway. It was a dream that came to life.

How did the New York audiences react?

David: They really seemed to be touched, moved, and inspired by the show! It was really nice to see such a positive reaction. A representative from Elephants.com came to pass out flyers after the show and raise interest in issues addressed in the show.

Steven: It was unreal. Everyone I spoke to loved it. The actors also got standing ovations.

Tell us about the play itself – why the theme of elephants?

Steven: If we don't start taking care of the rain forest and the animals that live there soon it will no longer exist. I just happen to be fascinated with elephants and I strongly feel they belong in the wild, not in the circus.

Craig: Steven and Norman really had some passions about elephants. There were a number of elephant sanctuary organizations and elephant rights organizations that became involved with *TUSK*. It does really tell a true story – there's a

lot of factual data in the musical. It's a family show that any can go see, but has strong factual points about how elephants are treated. It compels you to really think about the issues without hitting you over the head with it. There are a few jabs at the circus. These creatures are forced into captivity and forced to do tricks. Elephants are highly intelligent, too. And now in Africa, elephants are attacking people as they take away their land. They have nowhere to go! But it still has a lot of symbolism, too. Who hasn't been on a train to nowhere at some point in their life? What group of people out there hasn't faced similar persecution? There are human elements to the story that everyone can relate to.

David: Elephants serve as a beautiful metaphor for the human experience - very strong, family-oriented creatures. Oh, and Steven thinks he was an elephant in a past life! On a more serious note, people are reluctant to face the reality of animal cruelty that occurs right under our noses - in the circus. We've deafened ourselves to the voices of nature, similar to the way a rapist is deaf to the screams of his victim. It's our cultural upbringing to not look at these horrors - let alone take responsibility for them.

Why did they have mythological as well as human names?

Craig: In the story the elephants are introduced by their real elephant names - their tribe names. When they're taken into captivity by the characters in the show, they're given human names by the poacher's

Tusk is not
just about
elephants.
It covers
everything
from greed to
freedom.

wife, Jennifer. She's in a situation where she's forced to support her husband and what he's doing, getting the training done, and getting the show on the road. She develops a passion for these creatures and gives them names, like pets.

David: For me, this showed the gap between the mythical, mysterious essence of these creatures and the detached, bankrupt understanding humans have of their true natures.

Tell us about some of the elephant characters - who was the most crucial?

David: I found the children characters very important in bringing a lightness to the heaviness of the subject. Their freshness also represented the legacy carried down from generation to generation - in the elephant world and the human's.

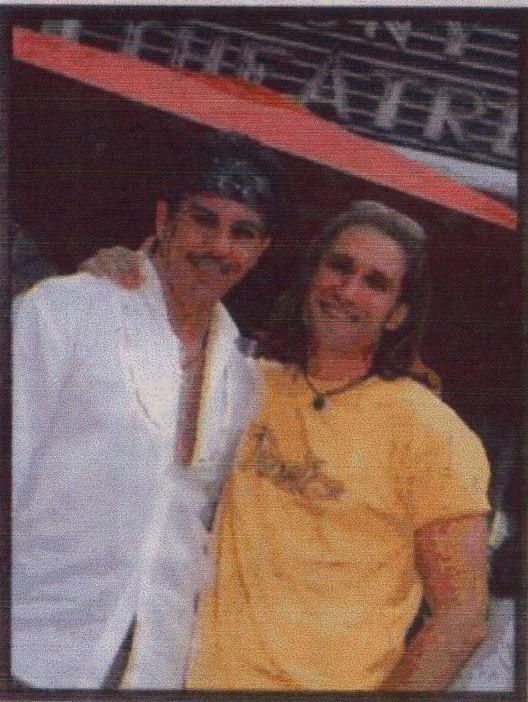
Steven: I feel the character Tera is crucial. He is killed for his tusks while the rest of his family is shipped off to the circus. Also, Mr. Pierce is key. He abuses the animals and his wife. There always has to be an evil character and that definitely is Mr. Pierce.

What message should the everyday person take away from this play?

Steven: To treat others with compassion and love. TUSK is not just about elephants. It covers everything from greed to freedom.

Craig: The message, as the song I wrote says, is to take a chance on yourself. It's really basic. It's a message of hope no matter what cards you might have been dealt in life. My other song, "The Train to Nowhere," is much more satirical. It's about hopes and dreams being shattered - taking away everything that mattered. But despite that tragedy, there still is hope! And in the end hope prevails.

David: The connection we have with all of life, and how our relationship to it is mirrored in our relationships with each other. By remembering our his-



Craig Strong and David Salih

tory of a time when we were more aware of that interconnection with all of life, we can finally have a chance to return to that state of honor and respect within our human community.

Where does TUSK go from here?

Craig: We would hope to get picked up by regional theatre and maybe even Broadway! What a great thing that would be! But it's a far cry from that because of funding. With the right funding you have access to much more. A stronger story line, technical support, costumes, set design. For this festival it was a very minimal set with the actors wearing very plain clothes.

David: Broadway, baby! Or even Off-Broadway would be great! We just have to let TUSK lead the way to wherever it may lead us.

Steven: We are looking into taking the musical on the road. Also we want to start contacting animation houses that might be interested in turning this into a feature family film. I strongly feel it will eventually wind up in a full Broadway production. I also would love to have a production done in South Beach or the Fort Lauderdale area. Who knows maybe David and Craig will be in it.

Did all of you work pretty well together, that you might want to do something collaborative again?

Craig: I've always enjoyed collaborating. For me it was exciting because I didn't have to do all the thinking on my own. This was a wonderful experience that's inspired me to be more creative and possible do another show for the stage. This festival bridges the gap between the time it takes to develop a show and get it on stage. It's a constant battle for an artist to get something on stage - even here in Miami Beach. I would definitely do something like this again with the same people.

David: I damn... those two bitches always insist on having the last word! Just kidding - The three of us have worked together before and we all seem to get very well. It's so much more fun to do collaborative projects, I find, than to lock myself up in the attic and write till my fingers fall off! The two who have a bias when we get together and for me, that's what a project should be about!

Steven: The project is blessed. David and Craig are both very talented but they also are close friends. I plan on writing with both of them in the future. South Beach has given me some wonderful gifts and knowing David and Craig is at the top of the list.

THE ELEPHANT SANCTUARY

The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, founded in 1995, is the nation's single natural habitat refuge developed specifically for endangered African and Asian elephants. It operates on 2,700 acres in Hohenwald, Tennessee - 85 miles southwest of Nashville. The Elephant Sanctuary exists for two reasons:

To provide a haven for old, sick or needy elephants in a setting of green pastures, old growth forests, spring-fed ponds and a heated barn for cold winter nights.

To provide education about the crisis facing these social, sensitive, passionately intense, playful, complex, exceedingly intelligent and endangered creatures.

The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee, is the nation's only natural-habitat refuge developed specifically to meet the needs of endangered elephants. It is a non-profit organization, licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, designed specifically for old, sick or needy elephants who have been retired from zoos and circuses.

Utilizing more than 2700 acres, it provides two separate and protected, natural habitat environments for Asian and African elephants. Our residents are not required to perform or entertain for the public. Instead, they are encouraged to live like elephants.

Phil Snyder, regional director of the Humane Society of the United States has stated, "The Elephant Sanctuary represents the future of enlightened captive elephant management."

The Elephant Sanctuary
P. O. Box 393
Hohenwald, TN 38462
931.794.6500
www.elephants.com
elephant@elephants.com

Tusk

a musical

*A new musical for the entire family
told with theatrical artistry of
silhouette and shadow puppets, about
the survival of an elephant family.*

Direction: **STEVEN YUHASZ**

Musical Supervision: **BRYON SOMMERS**

Musical Direction: **SETH WEINSTEIN**

Choreography: **JENNIFER PAULSON LEE**

Shadow Puppets: **DALLAS McCURLEY**

Lighting: **HERRICK GOLDMAN**

TICKETS: www.theatermania.com 212.352.3101

Book: Steven Billing, Norman Rea & Steven Yuhasz
Music: Bryon Sommers **Lyrics:** Norman Rea
Additional Music: David Salih & Craig Strang
Original Story & Additional Lyrics: Steven Billing

Featuring:

Ashley Arnold, Sandra Bargman*, Marnie Baumer*,
Charles Bergell*, Darryl E. Calmese Jr.*, Stacey Haughton*,
Val Moranto*, Will Perez*, Heidi Stallings*, Chris Vasquez*,
Paul Robert Verhoest, Jr.* & Billy Wheelan*

Stage Manager: Bryan Landrine*

*Actors appearing courtesy of Actors Equity Association

Press Representative: Susan L. Schulman
slspr@aol.com

SHEPPARD PRODUCTIONS LLC
245 WEST 75TH STREET, SUITE 5B
NEW YORK, NY 10023

Tusk
a musical

Where: The 47th Street Theatre
304 West 47th Street
*Between 8th & 9th,
Closer to 8th, NYC*

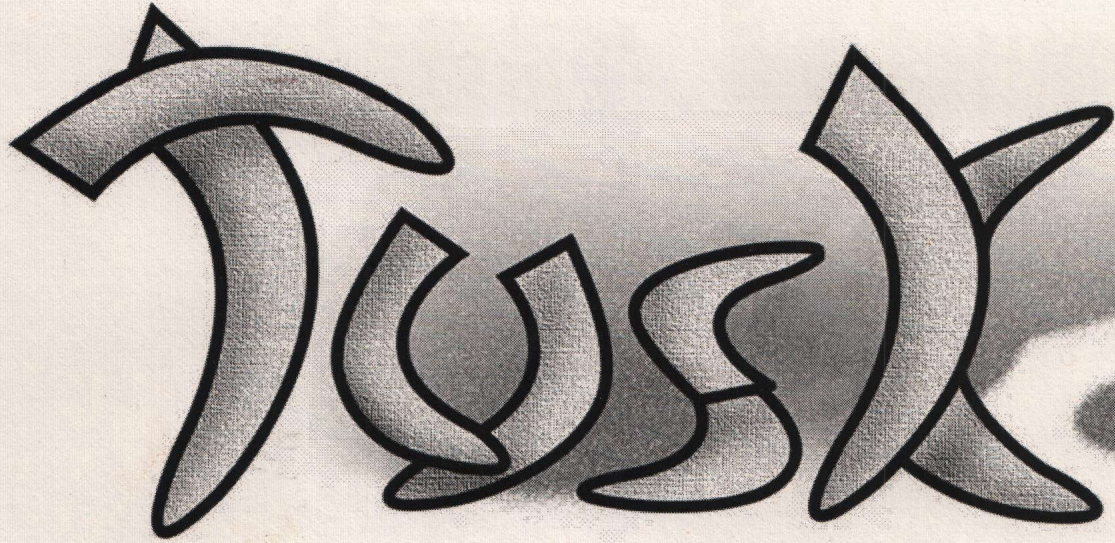
When: Sept. 18, 8PM Sept. 26, 1PM
 Sept. 19, 1PM Sept. 29, 1PM
 Sept. 21, 8PM Sept. 30, 8PM

TICKETS

www.theatermania.com
212.352.3101

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT
www.tuskamusical.com
www.nymf.org





a musical

September 19 and 20, 2003 8:00 p.m.
Swyer Theater at THE EGG *Free Admission*





The compelling story of a family of elephants
who make the ultimate sacrifice.

Watch this work-in-progress come to life on stage!

Book by: Steven Billing and Norman Rea with
Steven Yuhasz

Lyrics by: Steven Billing and Norman Rea

Music by: Bryon Sommers

Additional music by: David Salih and Craig Strang

Musical direction: Maria Riccio Bryce with David Cash

Movement by: Ellen Sinopoli

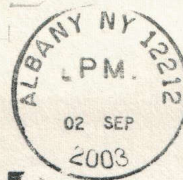
Direction by: Steven Yuhasz

September 19 & 20, 2003 8:00 p.m.

Followed by a half-hour discussion with the creators, cast and crew.

Swyer Theater at THE EGG Free Admission Ample Parking
The Empire State Plaza's Center for the Performing Arts
Albany, New York

Reservations recommended
Box Office: (518) 473-1845



*Craig Strang
1602 Altan Road #561
Miami FL 33139*

33139#2421

