

Magic Eclecticism

By Francine Russo

On the grand stage of the Plymouth Theatre where *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is unfolding, two young men dance with passion and abandon to a Latin beat—a dance of friendship and doom. Within hours one will be murdered—the other will be haunted by grief and guilt. And the music has to suggest it all.

"It goes from a somewhat flamenco edge to open up to the most blissful harmonies and then shuts down again," says composer Bob Telson. The Seinfeld look-(and sound-) alike in a gray sweatshirt and black jacket is explaining his musical strategy at a Broadway hangout across the street. "Music is a language," he goes on, "with a vocabulary of sounds, styles, textures—with connotations." What he hopes for each time is something "fresh." That's why he never expected to see his work on Broadway. For the composer of *The Warrior Ant* and *The Gospel at Colonus*, the Broadway musical cannibalizes its own great moments, giving the audiences the moments they've loved before. When he works with Philip Glass, on the other hand, half the audience might leave. "But the ones who got it never had that experience before. I want to give a spontaneous rather than a remembered response."

Running his fingers through his graying hair, Telson is an unabashed '60s guy with a distaste for the commercial. During that era, he recalls, he never had goals or thoughts for his future or even for how to make a living. "If it fascinated you, you got into it."

Telson got "into" nearly every kind of music in the Western world. A classical music prodigy who began playing piano at four, Telson divided his interests through adolescence into pop and classical. He did the high school thing, writing pop songs and playing in rock bands. He also studied pipe organ with Nadia Boulanger.

When he studied music at Harvard, his world opened up to include jazz, r&b, and writing for theater. His "first gig" with the Glass group gave him a different perspective. In the '70s, Latin and gospel music were his passions. He was glued to the Latin radio stations. He frequented the Latin dance halls in New York and fell in love with the music. "I studied every instrument in the club."

So he was pretty academic about it? "If you call drinking a few rum and cokes an academic approach," he says with a grin.

By 1975 he was playing in a salsa band. He was also checking out gospel. One day he took the subway up to a black church at 125th Street. Inside, "as incognito as a white hippie could be in an ill-fitting suit," he found himself asked to play a gospel tune while 150 parishioners cheered.

Telson was fascinated by the African roots of both kinds of music. "It's so interesting to see how gospel music and most Latin American music are a combination of two cultures meeting, often unwillingly—the African culture with the European culture." Because of the African diaspora, he explains, where African music blended with Spanish and American Indian, Latin rhythms resulted. In America, the mixture with English resulted in gospel. Latin



Bob Telson, composer of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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music differs from most American music like r&b and pop where the bass is the bottom line and the drums play the rhythm. In Latin music, every instrument is an "interlocking component with a rhythmic function."

Telson's first serious interest in theater came when, through Glass, he met Lee Breuer, who asked him to write a disco version of Chopin's Funeral March. That association eventually led to his collaboration with Breuer on *The Gospel at Colonus* and *The Warrior Ant*. Since then his work has been eclectic, writing the score for *Bagdad Cafe*, making steel band music, and writing an Argentinean-influenced ballet score for Twyla Tharp.

With Argentinean music, Telson's personal and musical life merged. In

1990 he met Isabel De Sebastian, a singer from Buenos Aires, now his wife and the mother of his son. They shared an interest in Latin American folkloric music. "She sings tango beautifully and understands it quite well, in her soul," he says, "as well as the more Argentinean Indian elements." It was these elements, including the use of the accordionlike *bandoneon*, that colored the ballet score for Tharp. Telson sent this piece to *Chronicle's* creator Graciela Daniele when she asked to hear a sample of his work. The Argentinean director-choreographer had known him only as a gospel music writer. When she heard the *bandoneon*, says Telson, "she melted."

But surely Márquez is Colombian, not Argentinean? "We've interpreted

the forgotten village in no particular country," says Telson. "Márquez is known for his magic realism. Why shouldn't it have a magic without borders? It was more important to find the emotional resonances."

The emotions of *Chronicle* bear a resemblance to those of *Gospel*. Márquez tells the story of a murder that everyone in the village knew about but no one could prevent, the murder by two brothers of the man who dishonored their sister and caused her bridegroom to disown her on their wedding night. Though it does not produce the same cathartic experience as *Gospel*, Telson says, "destiny has a role. The goal is to tell an amazing story rooted in a culture, the culture of my wife's grandparents in Spain. It's pretty much gone now—the concept of duty and honor. It's like a classical tragedy with references to flamenco."

The score is eclectic with "tiny tastes of flamenco, references to tango and folkloric forms like *chacarera*, a music from Northern Argentina influenced by Indian culture, and *baguala*, an Indian music from Argentina. I had to make the music sound as if it's coming from one voice, one center."

In one scene, the men are gathered in a saloon. The *baguala* influence is heard when a woman sings with a simple drum accompaniment. Usually *baguala* is just a drum and vocal, but Telson added a twist. "I put some Spanish Western sounding harmonies in it, with a wink of an eye toward Charles Bronson playing the harmonica."

To Telson, purity wasn't as important as setting the scene, the Wild West of dominoes, drinking, and deal-making. "There's a fine line," he says, "the integrity of the music and bringing in another element that interests you." ■