



## BWW Review: Alan Menken Debuts Fresh Retrospective Concert at Segerstrom Center

By Michael L. Quintos  
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"I hope you all don't mind... but you're my guinea pigs tonight," joked [Alan Menken](#) as he walked out center stage to deafening applause.

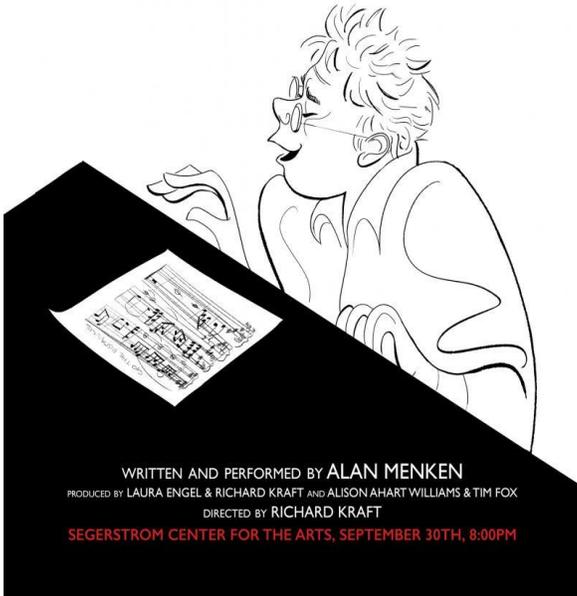
"You're my first audience for this!"

And, yes, that applause was very much well-deserved.

The prolific eight-time Academy Award-winning composer---perhaps best known for his decades of unforgettable work in several landmark Disney animated musicals---was on hand to unveil a world premiere concert entitled "**A WHOLE NEW WORLD WITH [Alan Menken](#)**" on September 30, 2016 at Orange County's Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa. Part piano cabaret concert, part one-man retrospective story time/show-and-tell, this "trial" showcase, he hoped, would serve as the springboard for what is to become a series of similar concerts celebrating his enviable career thus far.

# A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF ALAN MENKEN

AN EVENING OF STORIES AND SONGS  
BY 8-TIME OSCAR®-WINNING COMPOSER ALAN MENKEN



With that in mind---that this was the first time ever that Menken's hybrid concert was being presented in front of an audience---the musical genius spent the next two-plus hours (plus a brief intermission) reminiscing on almost half-a-century's worth of his life's work through stories and songs, from his auspicious beginnings writing commercial jingles for Roundup Pesticides, through the height of his magical time with his equally brilliant collaborator, the late [Howard Ashman](#), and up to today, where his work still spans from multiple simultaneous projects across stages, TV and film.

His fascinating stories---chronologically laid out neatly for all to follow---were indeed very interesting, particularly when he expounded on the specific processes involved in creating some of his most famous compositions. From behind a grand piano flanked by three giant screens behind him, Menken orated his recollections while reading his lines with determined precision via, I assume, strategically-placed TelePrompTers which, one hopes, he'll eventually ditch in future shows---if only so he wouldn't sound so seemingly locked in to every word of his script in front of him.

When he's singing, though, he is clearly much more at ease... letting each song flow effortlessly to the audience's collective glee.

The projection screens---when not displaying images of his home office complete with gigantic trophy cases that hold his many Oscars, Grammys, Tonys and more---occasionally flashed throwback pictures of his childhood, his family, him alongside his collaborators, and, yes, images from his many works themselves as he spoke about them.

Admittedly, my knowledge of Menken has mostly centered on his body of work on Broadway (LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, A CHRISTMAS CAROL, SISTER ACT, etc.) and, of course, his unforgettable contributions for Disney. So to hear his other work---from an early musical adaptation of [Kurt Vonnegut's](#) GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER up through even the songs he wrote for Marvel's *Captain America* and the raunchy animated film *Sausage Party*---was certainly a special extra treat.

First, he began the evening with, naturally, memories of his childhood (including cute vintage pics), early ditties (including an amusing ode to marijuana), and recalling a desire to be the next [Bob Dylan](#), even though his family was primarily in the dental field. Later he recounted meeting (and soon marrying) his wife Janis, a ballet dancer with the Downtown Ballet Company. The pair have two daughters, Anna and Nora.

But, undeniably, it was his staggeringly spectacular songbook at Disney that became the long, drawn-out main course of this excellent musical buffet.



And perhaps rightly so, much of the evening was spent praising his late former songwriting partner [Howard Ashman](#), a thoughtful genius whom Menken continually acknowledges to be one of his most cherished friends and creative partners. The world of musicals both stage and screen certainly suffered a huge loss upon Ashman's death. Starting with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) then onto *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992), Menken and his LITTLE SHOP writing partner Ashman helped usher in the studio's infamous animated musical renaissance that many of us (like me) still have embedded in our brains.

His nostalgic trip down memory lane had him singing medleys from all three films and the audience was understandably entranced. (Honestly, though, I could have gone without the cosplaying fangirls sitting directly behind me singing *everything* out loud so we can hear *them* instead of Menken, but then again---you have to hand it to a man that has written such memorable songs that many people love and adore).

"Back then," Menken recalled with a lump in his throat, "being HIV+ was a death sentence."

Unfortunately, Ashman passed away in March of 1991 due to AIDS complications---just months before *Beauty and the*

*Beast* had its celebrated movie premiere. Ashman would not be present to see the finished film become the first ever animated film to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards.

In one of Menken's most touching and heartwarming recollections, he shared a bit of a conversation he had with Ashman just minutes after winning their first Oscars for *The Little Mermaid*:

"I'm glad you're taken care of," Ashman whispered to him, hinting his relief that Menken will be okay once Ashman passes away, which he did while the pair were working on the music for *Aladdin* (Lyricist [Tim Rice](#) would later come in to help finish the remaining songs for the film).

While the evening spent a lot of time highlighting his many accomplishments, Menken also allowed glimpses of his work that *didn't* quite get as enthusiastic a reaction.



In a funny bit of self-effacing humor, Menken also pointed out his many disappointments, including having the distinction of winning both the Oscar and the "Razzie" (the Golden Raspberry Awards given to the worst films) in the same year. The former was for *Aladdin*, while the latter was for his work in the box office bomb-turned-cult home video hit *Newsies*. He, of course, had the last laugh: the stage version of *Newsies* became a hit Broadway and national touring musical---to the delight of fansies everywhere (sure enough, *Aladdin* too eventually made it to Broadway). And as an especially wonderful treat, Menken performed---what he called---the hardest song he's ever written: "Watch What Happens" a new song he and [Jack Feldman](#) wrote for the new stage musical which featured rapid-fire lyrics. Though he warned the audience that he may stumble on the words (as he has been during the rehearsals for the concert), he managed quite well!

Of course, besides Ashman, Rice and Feldman, Menken also collaborated with other accomplished lyricists such as [Glenn Slater](#) (LEAP OF FAITH, SISTER ACT, Disney's *Home on the Range*, and the upcoming Broadway musical A BRONX TALE), [David Zippel](#) (Disney's *Hercules* and *Mulan*) and, yes, Broadway composer [Stephen Schwartz](#). He shared the story that Schwartz (the man behind PIPPIN, GODSPELL, and WICKED) was almost on the brink of completely quitting the business to become a psychologist. Lucky for us (and future Elphaba-wannabes), Schwartz got the call from Menken and the two went on to collaborate on the memorable music for Disney's animated adaptations of *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (the latter was also recently made into a stage musical).

When it came time for Disney to produce a live-action musical parody of the studio's own Princess-y type films, Menken himself raised his hand for the gig, particularly since they were looking for songwriters to parody Menken's signature Disney style.

"Who better to parody me... than ME!?" Menken gleefully shouted. Thus, *Enchanted* was born. But it was his rendition of the Oscar-nominated love song "I See The Light" from Disney's Rapunzel film *Tangled* (as part of a medley) that really got to me. Yep, tears formed.



Towards the end of the evening, Menken boasted that in 2012, he had the honor of having three shows simultaneously running on Broadway: NEWSIES, LEAP OF FAITH, and SISTER ACT---all stage adaptations of films. Fittingly, after gracing the audience with cheeky songs from the two-season ABC TV musical comedy series *Galavant*, he ended the evening by letting this first audience hear the brand new original song he has written for the upcoming live action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* which is set to hit theaters in March 2017.

Overall, the concert was an absolute delight for both avid and casual fans of Menken's repertoire, particularly since it was quite all-encompassing. I'm not sure he missed a single thing from his catalog, which, frankly, definitely gives audiences their money's worth. The personal anecdotes were amusing, swift, and often times even quite informative (he was writing a [Cab Calloway](#)/Fats Waller type of musical style for *Aladdin's* Genie, but was pleasantly surprised how well [Robin Williams](#) took on the task when he was cast).

But perhaps the biggest, most wonderful surprise of all during the concert? Menken has a pretty decent voice... and is quite a strong belter! Not bad for a guy who talked and played the piano all by himself all night long!

So if you're lucky enough to be in a city hosting Menken's retrospective concert... do yourself a huge favor and go!

*(On a side note---I am loving the fact that Orange County's Segerstrom Center for the Arts has been playing host to these kinds of "out-of-town" tryouts for retrospective concerts, such as the amazing INTO THE WOODS reunion some years back. Please, theater community, keep having them here!)*