

# Not the same, old 'Song & Dance' for Manchester

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NEW YORK — Melissa Manchester, pop star, songwriter, jingle songstress and former backup singer for Bette Midler, leans forward to make a point about musical comedy, the newest phase in her eclectic show business career.

"Let me tell you, rock 'n' roll is like a Sunday picnic compared to the theater," said the woman best known for such hits as "You Should Hear How She Talks About You," "Don't Cry Out Loud" and "Midnight Blue."

"Eight shows a week is a very serious meditation to get yourself through."

What concerns her professionally for the next four months is "Song & Dance," the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical about an English hat designer named Emma and her romantic adventures in America — specifically New York and Los Angeles.

On Broadway, "Song & Dance" was tailored to the formidable talents of Bernadette Peters, and her performance won a Tony award. Manchester stars

in the national touring company, which opened in June in Dallas and will visit 19 cities before ending in December. Aside from a small television role several years ago, it's her first acting job.

The title, "Song & Dance," tells all. The first act is a solo performance with the star singing alone on stage. Act 2 is mostly dance and concentrates on Joe, a Nebraska cowboy who is Emma's true love.

"But the first act is not a glorified concert," Manchester insists. "This is bona fide acting, getting lost in this character and telling her story. It's a wonderful spill into the deep end of the theatrical pool."

Manchester never saw Peters or Betty Buckley, her replacement, during the show's 13-month Broadway run and had turned down previous offers to do musical theater.

"God bless Jule Styne," she said. "He's been after me to do 'Funny Girl,' but those were historical shoes to fill in that musical."

It was Richard Maltby who finally changed her mind about appearing in a real piece of musical theater. Maltby had seen her per-



**Melissa Manchester**  
First significant acting job

form during an AIDS benefit at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1985, and thought she would be

perfect for "Song & Dance." He had directed the New York production of the musical and had a hand in reworking its book as well as Don Black's original lyrics.

"He is the best person I could imagine to walk me into this theatrical world," Manchester said. "He's such a gentle person. He tried to fill in the gaps as much as possible, telling me what the story was about."

Maltby took her to the Juilliard School in Lincoln Center to work with a dialectician who helped her secure the English accent. More important, there were a half-dozen, very private performances.

Before opening in Dallas, Manchester did a workshop in Los Angeles of the first act. For six nights before an invited audience, she worked on the musical in the tiny, 90-seat Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. There was no scenery and only piano accompaniment, but the experience was invaluable.

"It gave me a chance to see where the thread of the piece is, the substance, as well as the laughs," she said. "The first time I heard an audience laugh I

thought, 'Funny, these must be the jokes.'"

Manchester agreed to the six-month tour with some trepidation, even though her husband, screenwriter Kevin DeRemer, and nearly year-old son Nathan were traveling with her. The longest period she had toured in the past was for three months.

"That's the best thing about reality," she said. "It's much more than you could ever fantasize. It's harder, but it's also more rewarding."

"I'm really blessed in so many ways because my husband is for us 100 percent."

"In the old days when I toured, I used to live like a privileged monk," she said. "Just be silent all day long. Now my boy gets his walks, and I feed him, and we sing songs, and I whistle and smile and make faces. I just talk more quietly."

"You don't live quite as hysterically as you used to because a child simplifies everything," Manchester said. "It puts your ego right where it belongs — in the dumper — because there is nothing quite as urgent as a dirty diaper that needs to be changed now."