

'Johnny Jones' gives Cassidy a dandy boost

By Lynn Van Matre

Pop music critic

When his agent called from New York with the news that the lead in George M. Cohan's "Little Johnny Jones" could be his, David Cassidy didn't even consider playing it cool.

"I nearly freaked," recalls Cassidy, who will open in a Broadway-bound production of the vintage musical Aug. 12 at Arie Crown. "My palms started sweating while I was reading the script. I kept thinking, 'This is so great.' It had been a long time since I'd come across something that really jumped out at me like that. It was as if God had sent me a gift."

Approximately 10 years ago, Cassidy was blessed [or cursed, depending upon how one views these things] with sudden, staggering popularity with the female portion of the bubble gum brigade. The year 1970 may have belonged to Bobby Sherman, but by 1971 Cassidy—thanks to "The Partridge Family" television series, in which he sang and starred with his stepmother, Shirley Jones—clearly had toppled Sherman from the teen idol throne.

He was 21, but looked much younger, peach-fuzz cute and coltish at 5 feet 7 inches and 120 pounds, and cut from the same cuddly, nonthreatening cloth as Sherman had been [and as his half-brother, Shaun Cassidy, a reigning adolescent idol of the late '70s, would be after him]. For five years, he toured the world, valiantly trying to raise his passable voice above childish screams. The frenzy hadn't completely died out by 1975, but the David Cassidy lunch boxes, David Cassidy bubble gum, David Cassidy records, David Cassidy dolls, David Cassidy 3-D postcards, David Cassidy coloring books, and David Cassidy dresses were either moving sluggishly or else had already passed into pop merchandising history. But it didn't matter, Cassidy insists, that his fans had apparently had their fill of him; he'd had enough, too.

"When I look back on the whole experience now, I think of the good stuff," he says. "I think about how I was fortunate enough to have touched millions of persons around the world. I got to do something very unique, and I'm thankful for that. But there were a lot of frustrations. Everything had become anticlimactic to me, and I think that I was about to lose my sanity. I felt that the only way I could go on was to leave that particular part of my career behind me, and not perpetuate it in any way."

"So I retired, so to speak, for more than three years. I stopped doing TV, I quit making records, I didn't do interviews. I got out of the business for two purposes."

"One was to get in touch with myself, because I had done nothing but work for almost five years straight, and I had lived such a strange, almost isolated existence. So quitting the business was something that I needed to do on a personal, emotional level," says Cassidy, who married actress Kay Lenz in 1977.

"The other reason I did it was for professional reasons, so that people would take me seriously as an actor."

In 1978, the former Partridge Family member turned television detective, making his "comeback" in an episode of "Police Story" that served as the inspiration for "David Cassidy—Man Undercover," a short-lived series whose title was longer than its run. In fact, Cassidy barely had time to record "The Theme From 'Man Undercover'" before the show was canceled. Soon after that, frustration set in.

"I became really exhausted with trying to find good things to do in Los Angeles in TV and films," says Cassidy, these days a boyish-looking 31. "I wanted to work, but I didn't want to do the junk that I was offered. I read so many scripts over the last few years, but

most of them were crap—silly car crash films or bad horror films that I didn't want to do. Finally, about seven months ago, I went to New York to talk to my agent about perhaps finding a good play to do, and he came up with 'Little Johnny Jones.' I couldn't believe it."

"See, when I was a kid growing up in New Jersey," says the singer, the son of actress Evelyn Ward and the late actor Jack Cassidy [the couple divorced four years after David was born], "I got the chicken pox when I was about 7 or 8 and had to stay home from school. There was this program on television called 'Million Dollar Movie,' where they ran the same movie four times a day for about a week, and the week I was sick, they were showing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy,' starring Jimmy Cagney in the life story of George M. Cohan. I loved it, especially the sequence from 'Little Johnny Jones,' where he tap dances and sings 'Give My Regards to Broadway' and 'Yankee Doodle Dandy.' I watched the film about 25 times, and I got so I knew every line. Then, around 1976, I had the opportunity to meet Cagney—my dad and my stepmom, Shirley Jones, were very close to Cagney and his wife—and it was wonderful. So doing this play feels right for me all the way down the line."

"And I think the time is right for it now, too. There's a whole generation of people—the ones who went through the '60s and the Viet Nam War era, and I count myself among them—who are rediscovering their patriotism right now," says Cassidy, who was fortunate enough to draw No. 346 in the 1969 draft lottery and was never called into military service.

To prepare for the role, which requires a good deal of hoofing as well as singing, Cassidy embarked upon a crash course in tap dancing last January.

"I took private lessons for an hour or so every day," he says. "But it's very intimidating to have to put a smile on your face and go out there onstage with just a couple of months of experience, particularly when you're working with people who have been dancing for 16 or 17 years and are terrific. Actually, it has only been in the last month that I've felt competent and confident enough to be out there in front of them, tapping. But out of all the work that I've ever done, doing this show has been the most fun."

Cassidy's future projects include a "Little Johnny Jones" cast album; a trip to Nashville in six months or so to cut his first album in several years ["I'm listening more to country music now, but I'm mainly interested in good songs, period"]; and finding the farm of his dreams, probably in

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David Cassidy in 1973 at the height of his teen-idol fame in "The Partridge Family" (left) and dressed for his starring role in the Broadway-bound musical "Little Johnny Jones."

