



GRETCHEN ERTL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Baritone Takes Aim At a Broadway Dream

By MICHAEL PAULSON

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Josh Groban is a big fan of the theater. He acted at a performing arts high school, he sees plays in Los Angeles and New York, and his latest album is a set of show tune covers.

Now, in the midst of an enormously successful career as a recording artist, this baritone balladeer is preparing to make his Broadway debut.

Mr. Groban, 34, will star in the Broadway premiere of "Natasha,

Josh Groban is scheduled to star in "Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812" on Broadway in September.

Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812," a musical adaptation of a 70-page section of Tolstoy's masterwork, "War and Peace." The show, opening on Wednesday at the American Repertory Theater here, is scheduled to arrive on Broadway in September.

The casting is a provocative combination of man and material. Mr. Groban, who has sold more than 30 million records and maintains a busy touring schedule, is best known as a traditionalist, whose success has been built around soaring interpretations of classics and love songs. "The Great Comet," on the other hand, is an electro-pop opera born of the experimental theater movement; the initial production was a boi-

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terously immersive gambol set in a makeshift supper club at which vodka and pierogi were served to the audience.

In an interview on Saturday at the American Repertory Theater, where he had come to see the show and meet the current cast, Mr. Groban, who has acted on television and in film, said that in recent years he had had "some wonderful offers" to appear on Broadway, but that he chose "The Great Comet" because of a passion for the material and a desire to stretch.

"For a first time doing it, I wanted it to be something that was a little less expected, and I wanted it to be a show and a character that forced me to get a little bit out of my comfort zone and do something that people haven't seen before," he said. "To have the opportunity and freedom to take off the hat of 'me,' and to dive into a character, is something I think will be very freeing, and very fun."

Mr. Groban first encountered "The Great Comet" in 2013, when he attended an Off Broadway performance, posed for a photo with the cast, and raved on Twitter, "One of my most favorite theatrical experiences ever. LOVED." A commercial producer attached to the project, Howard Kagan, reached out to Mr. Groban this year to ask if he would consider playing Pierre in a Broadway production. Mr. Groban not only said yes, but went out and bought his first accordion (in the show, Pierre plays the accordion, as well as the piano) and began reading "War and Peace" (he's now about 800 pages in).

The creative team, in turn, has been expanding the role of Pierre, who during the time frame of the musical, is a wealthy and unhappy



Josh Groban, center, who will star in "Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812," with Dave Malloy, the show's creator, and its director, Rachel Chavkin.

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Muscovite in his mid-30s, characterized, according to the play's director, Rachel Chavkin, by "degeneracy, rottedness and decrepitude."

The show's creator, Dave Malloy — who came up with the idea for the musical when reading "War and Peace" while working as a pianist on a cruise ship — originated the role of Pierre, and has long thought the character was underdeveloped. Mr. Malloy, who wrote the book, music and lyrics for the show, has already

given Pierre a new aria ("Dust and Ashes"), and he has been listening to Mr. Groban's albums while contemplating other changes to take full advantage of what he calls Mr. Groban's "beautiful, angelic instrument." (The show is evolving in other ways, as well: At the start of a duel, there is now a cheeky musical quotation from the score of "Hamilton.")

"The Great Comet" has been in production since 2012, when it was staged at Ars Nova, an Off Broadway theater. In 2013 and 2014, the

show was presented in large tents, first in New York's meatpacking district, and then in Midtown.

The staging here in Cambridge, which is in previews and opens on Wednesday, is the first time the show has been presented in a proscenium-style theater. The show's MacArthur-grant-winning designer, Mimi Lien, seeking to replicate the intimate experience the show had in less conventional settings, has covered the walls with red velour drapery as well as 400 paintings of wars, landscapes,

religious icons and historical figures; she has built seating around the stage, and small stages amid the seats, so that the action can take place around and among the audience.

The Broadway production, which will use the same design, will be produced by Mr. Kagan, along with his wife, Janet Kagan, and Paula Marie Black. The cast, other than Mr. Groban, has not been announced.

The production team would not say how long Mr. Groban would be

with the show, other than to say that he had made a substantial time commitment. Mr. Groban called theater acting "something that I have wanted to do my whole life," and said this project, while "it may seem like a bit of an odd fit," was one that he would embrace and recommend to his fans.

"As soon as I find something that I feel people recognize me for, that's my cue to say, 'O.K., let's explore, let's wander a little and see where we land,'" he said.