

NY CULTURE

Broadway's 'The Visit' Receives a Diplomatic Welcome

Stars Chita Rivera and Roger Rees visit the home of the Swiss ambassador in New York



The consul general of Switzerland in New York, Ambassador André Schaller, rings a cowbell at a breakfast at the Swiss Residence on March 13 to fete 'The Visit.' PHOTO: WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

By **PIA CATTON**

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With a cowbell so heavy it took two hands to ring, the consul general of Switzerland, Ambassador André Schaller, drew the attention of guests assembled in his elegant Park Avenue living room.

Most were standing, but seated to his right were Tony Award-winning actors Chita Rivera and Roger Rees, stars of the coming Broadway musical "The Visit."

"Thank you very much for your 'visit,' " he said, chuckling. "I wish you 'Break a Leg!' or as we say in Swiss German 'Toi, Toi, Toi!' "



The occasion for the diplomatic interest in Broadway was the show's original source material: The 1956 play "The Visit" was written by a Swiss author, Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

"Among Swiss people, everybody knows it," said Brigitte Schaller, who hosted the breakfast gathering with her husband.

ENLARGE

From left to right, Brigitte Schaller, Ambassador André Schaller, Chita Rivera and Roger Rees at the Schallers' Park Avenue home on Friday. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The play, which has been translated into multiple languages and performed around the world, according to the ambassador, is about a widowed billionaire who returns to her tiny hometown. There, she seeks revenge against an ex-lover.

The material was also used for the 1964 film, starring Ingrid Bergman and Anthony Quinn. Turning it into a musical has been the work of celebrated Broadway hands for more than a decade.

This production, directed by John Doyle, is said to be the last completed musical of the duo behind “Cabaret” and “Chicago”—composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb, who died in 2004.

The third theatrical pen of “The Visit” is playwright Terrence McNally, winner of four Tony Awards and author of the star-studded comedy, “It’s Only a Play,” currently on Broadway.

The Kander-Ebb-McNally juggernaut has had a way of resulting in theatrical success, especially for Ms. Rivera. She has two Tony Awards for performances in the trio’s collaborations: “The Rink” in 1984 and “Kiss of the Spider Woman” in 1993. “Terrence McNally knows more about how I speak than anybody,” said Ms. Rivera.

Magnetic as ever, Ms. Rivera was besieged by photographers upon entering the Swiss ambassador’s home. Broadway’s original Anita in “West Side Story” is now 82 years old and has sharp, zesty movements even when adjusting a couch pillow.

In “The Visit,” her character arrives in the small town as a picture of glamour and wealth, but she is hiding emotional scars, plus an artificial leg and hand.

For a lifelong dancer, the work of restricting movement and creating the illusion of a hobble didn’t come easily. “I naturally want to move. So it’s a challenge to work against that,” she said. The show allows a mature actress to take the lead, which Ms. Rivera suspects women will enjoy seeing.

“It’s an example of how romantic you can be—age has nothing to do with it,” she said, fluttering her fingers, tipped in purple nail polish. “The body changes, but not the heart.”

Ms. Rivera’s co-star Mr. Rees is on the other end of that romance. “I call him ‘my animal,’ ” she said. “And in the show, she calls him her ‘panther.’ So there you are!”

Mr. Rees was more of a joker than a panther at the breakfast. “Is that a chocolate fountain?” he asked, pointing to a water feature.

Alas, no. Mr. Rees, who won a 1982 Tony for “The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby,” praised the Swiss hosts for celebrating Dürrenmatt, whose work he has performed and directed. “He’s like the Magritte of playwrights. He’s absurdist, very political, slightly Brechtian,” Mr. Rees said.

The cheerful event itself wasn’t political, but it was unusual for Broadway—not least of which because it started at 9 a.m. Guests were treated to a breakfast buffet of smoked salmon, pancakes, muffins and Bellini cocktails.

Mr. Schaller didn’t ring the cowbell to close the proceedings, but diplomatic staffers pointed out a smaller, decorative bell that might be easier to handle. That, they said, was more for a goat.

Write to Pia Catton at pia.catton@wsj.com