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## They've put a new spin on Old Hickory

A pair of experimental theater expats mix an Andrew Jackson storyline with Bush-era barbs and buzzing guitars.

By SEAN MITCHELL  
Special to The Times

THE next offering at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, the world premiere of the musical "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," can be traced to a café in New York's East Village, where director Alex Timbers and composer Michael Friedman met a couple of years ago on a "professional blind date," as Friedman puts it. Both were rising stars in small, experimental theater companies, and Timbers had staged the irreverent "A Very Merry Unauthorized Scientology Pageant," a one-hour musical by fellow Yale classmate Kyle Jarrow that won an Obie Award in 2004 and was later mounted at Santa Monica's Powerhouse Theater. [See 'Bloody,' Page F4]



KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times

ANDY AND CO.: A rifle-wielding Benjamin Walker is "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson."

## THEATER

## A 'Bloody' musical study of America

*['Bloody,' from Page F1]* Friedman had taken a course devoted to Jackson at Harvard, and near the end of his get-acquainted meeting with Timbers, the two happened upon the idea for a show about Jackson, the seventh president, first populist, war hero and famous despoiler of Native Americans. Promisingly, they also saw in the bumptious and belligerent "Old Hickory" some linkage to the current occupant of the White House and a way to dramatize major issues involved in America's coming of age.

"He was considered by many to be a hero," says Timbers, "and by others to be a genocidal murderer" for his role in driving whole tribes of Native Americans from their ancestral homes and relocating them west of the Mississippi. "His treatment of the Indians and his personal character are reflected in our current misfit president. He's the first incarnation of this incredibly charming idiot, the backwoods guy that you think, 'Why is this guy our president? But I'd really like to have a beer with him' that is represented by Bush and Huckabee, a little bit Obama and Edwards."

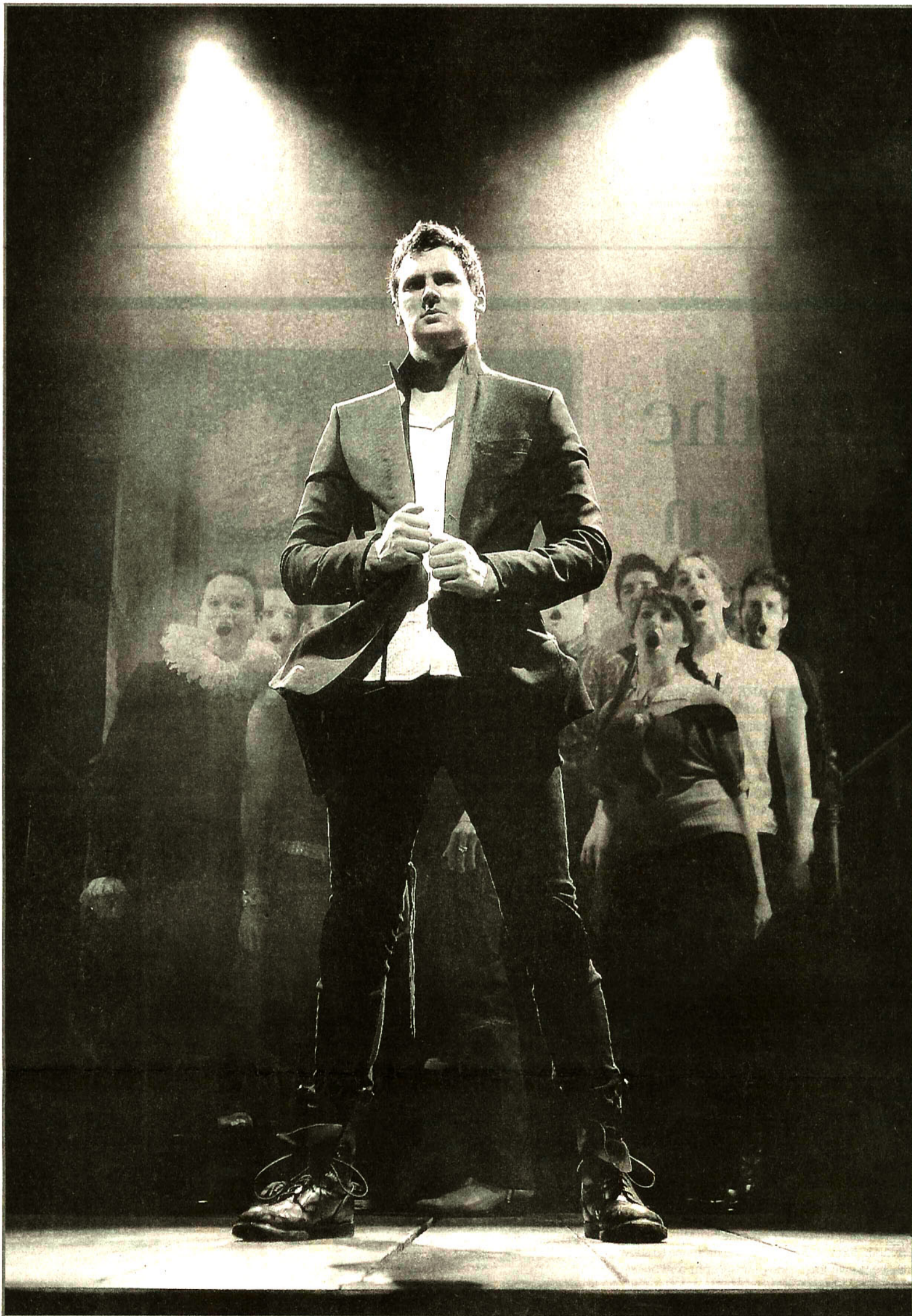
"And Bill Clinton," Friedman adds.

The authors take some dramatic license in having Jackson's parents both killed by Indian arrows, contrary to how they really died, but they also rely on the historical record in illustrating Jackson's contempt for such establishment rivals as John C. Calhoun and John Quincy Adams.

The election of 1824 that Jackson lost to Adams after winning the popular vote, Timbers says, "was totally Gore versus Bush — the clinically cold but absolutely right mathematician versus the strong but wrong cowboy outsider."

Although Friedman maintains that they did not set out to draw a "one-to-one" match-up of Jackson with any modern presidents, a note to the actors in the script states, "The character of Andrew Jackson is a cross between George W. Bush and Owen Wilson. He's a good-looking, immensely charismatic moron." (The role of Jackson will be played by Benjamin Walker, who appeared in the recent Broadway revival of "Inherit the Wind" and also in Clint Eastwood's film "Flags of Our Fathers.")

As Timbers, 29, and Friedman, 32, speak at a rapid cerebral pace about their show in a rehearsal room at the Douglas in Culver City, it becomes apparent that their concept for "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson" is both heady and hard to describe. In the script they use the word "metatheatricity" to define its style. It's not satire exactly, nor sketch comedy, though it has elements of both. Anachronisms abound in speech and costumes. Jarring juxtapositions unfold. Jackson, says Timbers, "talks like a contemporary teenager one moment, then in the next sentence speaks in a very complicated way." And of course, there are the electric guitars and sneakers.



**THE 7TH PRESIDENT:** Benjamin Walker (who appeared in the film "Flags of Our Fathers" and on Broadway in "Inherit the Wind") plays Jackson, who according to script notes is "a cross between George W. Bush and Owen Wilson. He's a good-looking, immensely charismatic moron."

KEN HIVELY Los Angeles Times

A schoolmarmy narrator in a wheelchair (Taylor Wilcox) lays out many of the facts of Jackson's life, dramatized initially by a cast of 18 in the manner of "a terrible PBS documentary," according to the script. At one point Jackson, tiring of listening to her, whips out a pistol and shoots the narrator in the throat, adding, "I'll take it from here."

If this sounds like a "Talladega Nights" moment, Timbers acknowledges the influence. "Will Ferrell humor is not seen as much in the theater," he says. "In a Will Ferrell movie you're not bothered by the fact there are winks to the fact that he's in a movie or that he's saying something completely ridiculous but totally believes it."

### Emo rock meets Old Hickory

**F**OR music to complement the teenage agony experienced both by Jackson and his young republic, the two thought of emo rock, the sometimes atonal clanging style with raw chest-wound lyrics made popular by bands such as Dashboard Confessional, Weezer and My Chemical Romance. "It was guys in their 20s singing about the girl who broke their heart when they were 14," Timbers says.

"People ask, 'Why a musical?'" Friedman says. "But what's great about doing a musical dealing with a historical subject is that musicals are anachronistic no matter what. The moment you have a rock band onstage, it makes it clear that Andrew Jackson is going to sing rock songs, and that's OK."

Friedman, who is classically trained, came relatively late to the theater. "I saw a lot of musicals growing up but I never wrote a song until I was 25, which is a little embarrassing. When you come to something at 25, you are an outsider and always will be. My approach is to show up and say, 'OK, let's figure out how to do this.' I enjoy that, hitting the ground running."

Center Theatre Group's artistic director Michael Ritchie first encountered Friedman when Friedman was an intern at Williamstown, Ritchie's former summer-theater domain in western Massachusetts. He remembers the young composer playing piano and attracting a crowd in the late-night cabaret there. "I walked past him once, and there were maybe eight people gathered around him just listening to him talk about music," Ritchie says. "He could play



MICHAEL ROBINSON CHAVEZ *Los Angeles Times*

**THE CREATIVE TEAM:** Director Alex Timers, left, and composer Michael Friedman see some parallels between President Jackson and the current commander in chief.

anything, but I realized he wasn't just a musician but a musical artist. I thought, 'This guy's going to go places.'

Friedman says one of his favorite Broadway musicals is Roger and Hammerstein's dark-hued "Carousel," and that he also liked the recent "Spring Awakening," with a rock score by Duncan Shiek.

On a panel at a theater conference in Minneapolis recently that included Shiek, the composer said, "We all realized we were most influenced by 'The Muppet Show' — which used conventions of musical theater while subverting them and making them a little ridiculous but also making them wonderful. That tension is what makes the best musicals good: trying to subvert this while also paying homage to it."

"The launching point of our show is sincerity and irony rubbing up against each other in really sort of uncomfortable and exciting ways," says

## 'Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson'

**Where:** Kirk Douglas Theatre  
9820 Washington Blvd.  
Culver City

**When:** Today

**Ends:** Feb. 17

**Price:** \$20 to \$50

**Contact:** [www.centertheatre.org/tickets/](http://www.centertheatre.org/tickets/)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 40 minutes

Timbers. "It starts out in broad sketch comedy and by the end of the show becomes more like a play, naturalistic and morally complicated."

Jackson, the rude frontiersman and hero of the War of 1812 who mispronounced words and couldn't spell, begins to wrestle with the idea of his legacy, while the authors take pains to suggest that whatever he was, he was a product of the people who elected him.

"He was the greatest expansionist president, more than Jefferson," Timbers says. "He doubled the size of America. We wouldn't be here in California today doing this show if it weren't for Jackson and Jackson's handling of the Indian question. These issues of terror on the frontier and manifest destiny that have analogous connections to things we're dealing with today are rooted in the moral struggles of Andrew Jackson.

Jackson, it seems, is in the air. Earlier this

month PBS broadcast a new documentary, "Andrew Jackson, Good, Evil and the Presidency." He's at the center of Daniel Walker Howe's newly published and acclaimed "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America," part of the Oxford History of the United States. Sean Wilentz wrote a new biography of him in 2005.

"As the question of American imperialism comes to the fore," Timbers says, "it's brought a revisionist view of Jackson. One of the images we started with was George W. Bush and Iraq, confronting his options. Does he stay up late at night thinking about his legacy?"

"I was interested in Jackson before this production came along," says Ritchie, who two years ago produced Robert Schenkkan's coolly received revisionist play about Lewis and Clark, "Lewis and Clark Reach the Euphrates," that tried to locate the roots of later disastrous American foreign policy in the historic expedition. Though not a success, it was an indication that Ritchie planned to continue CTG's long-standing tradition of staging politically charged shows. The Jackson play is being produced in association with New York City's Public Theater, whose artistic director, Oskar Eustis, was once a director at CTG's Mark Taper Forum.

"He was America's first rock star," Ritchie says of Jackson. "He was about popularity and being bold. We're producing this show during the election cycle, and that didn't happen randomly. But more importantly, the play struck me with its theatricality first."

Ritchie, whose taste in rock music is indicated by a poster of the Who hanging in his office, admits he had never heard of emo music before Friedman brought the show to him, with a CD of music recorded in a workshop at Williamstown. "But I listened to the CD and listened again and couldn't stop listening," he says.

Timbers and Friedman say they, in fact, abhor what Timbers calls "the hermetic world of musical theater. Our background is in running these small experimental theater companies in New York that create what we call 'downtown theater with an uptown sensibility' — accessible avant-gardism. The only way we're going to get audiences is by putting a premium on entertainment and showmanship. It's an exciting alchemy, trying to create something new without pushing people away."