



Performers and others gathered for *Pacific Overtures*' cast recording session, produced by Thomas Z. Shepard (seated at left). James Dybas (white turtleneck), Mark Hsu Syers (dark sweater) and Gedde Watanabe (open collar, dark jacket) were the Old Man, the Warrior and the Boy who sang "Someone in a Tree." Sondheim leans on the wall in the background. At far right is music director Paul Gemignani. Photo provided by James Dybas

# I was "Someone in a Tree"

A recollection about *Pacific Overtures*

• FIRST PERSON BY JAMES DYBAS •

**W**e were in Boston, the first of our two try-out cities (Washington, D.C., being the other) for *Pacific Overtures* in November 1976. We had been playing the show for about a week, and I was singing the role of the French Admiral in the song "Please Hello" and playing the role of the Imperial Court's Second Councilor. Not everyone was assigned roles from the very beginning, and one midweek evening after the show, Hal Prince approached me and asked if I would learn the role of the Old Man who sings "Someone in a Tree." I felt honored, but was terrified as well because he said that he would like to hear it a few days later. With the help of our orchestra pianist and my tape recorder, I stuffed my head

like a sausage, piece by piece, learning the seven-minute, 170-bar song.

I'll never forget that Saturday, Nov. 16, before the matinee. I was asked to be at Steve Sondheim's hotel suite at noon to sing for him and the creative team. I got there five minutes early; Steve was on the phone and motioned for me to have a seat. On top of the piano were several empty coffee cups and ashtrays filled with cigarette butts.

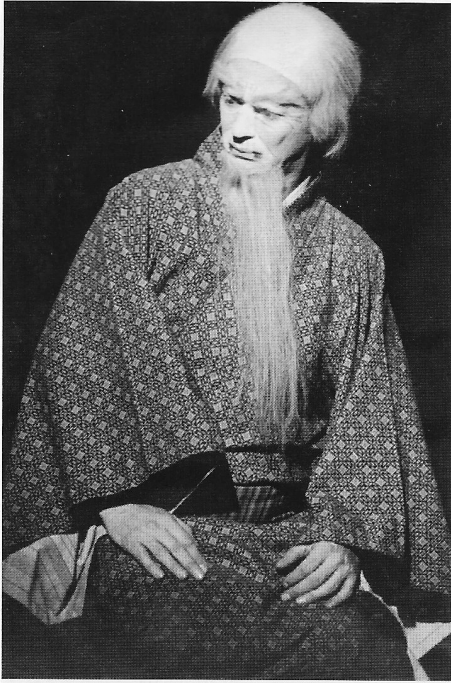
I felt like I was in one of those Hollywood musicals from the '40s about putting on a show. Next thing, the doorbell rang and in came Pat Birch, Hal Prince and Ruth Mitchell. Everyone sat down on the sofa and Steve said, "Are you

ready, Jimmy?" Sitting at the piano, he played the lead-in musical figures. Holding the music in my hands, I started to sing: "Pardon me, I was there."

I was nervous as all get out. I can remember singing the last lines of the song, "Only cups of tea/And history/And someone in a tree!" I think I must have let out a deep breath afterwards and then started to laugh with relief.

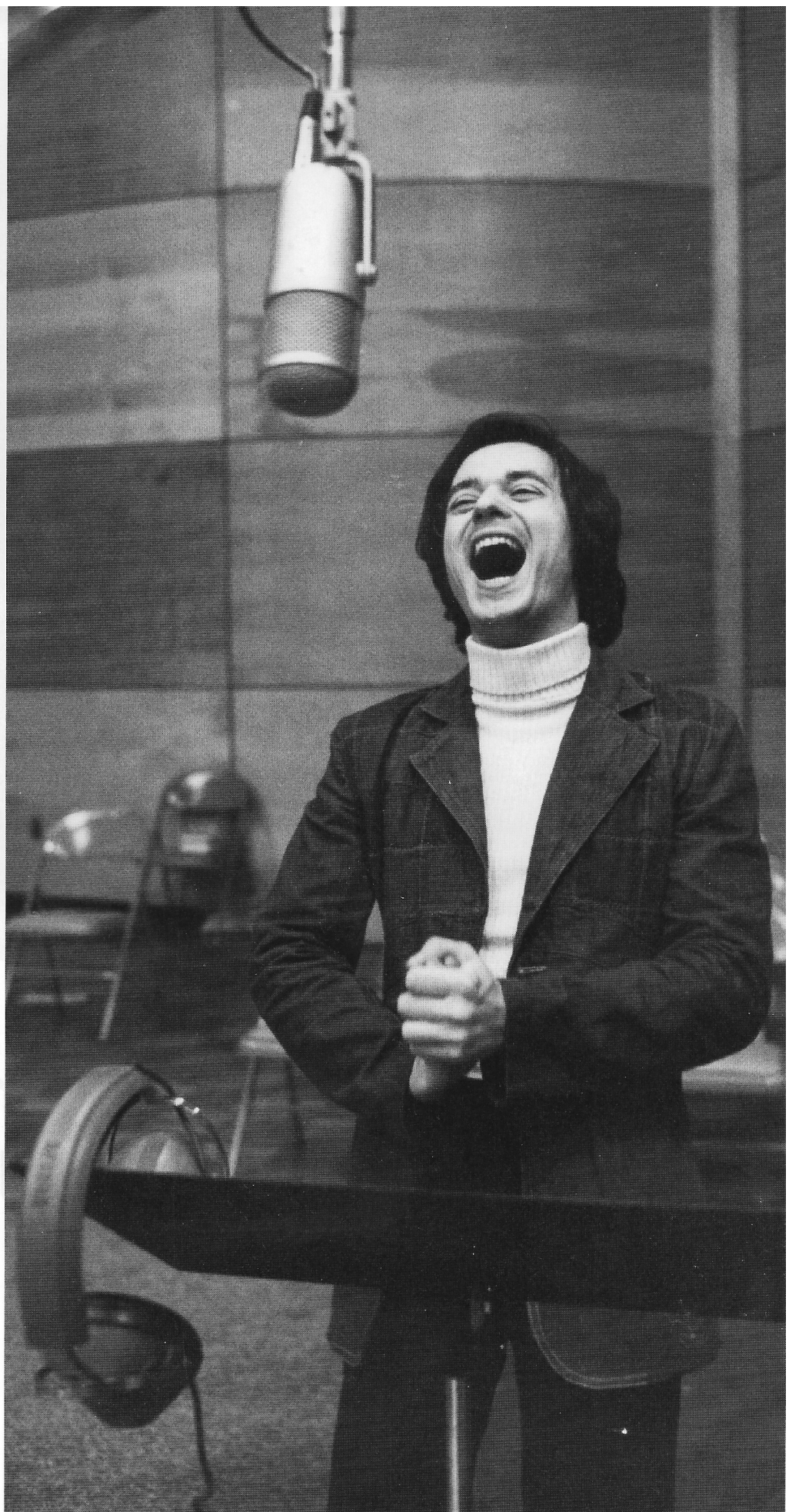
Hal said, "That's what we wanted to hear." I didn't know if I got the role or not; it was like walking on a tightrope. I made my way to the theater and, on the way, one of the cast members was coming up the street. He said, "I heard that you're gonna be singing 'Someone in a Tree.'"





**Top: James Dybas as the Old Man in the original production of *Pacific Overtures*.** Photo by Martha Swope, courtesy James Dybas

**Right: Dybas records his portion of "Someone in a Tree" for the original cast recording of *Pacific Overtures*.** Photo courtesy James Dybas



I said, "Oh yeah, how do you know?" He just smiled and didn't say a word. Now I was really stupefied.

I got to the theater just before half-hour. About five minutes later Hal arrived and said, "We want you to do the song with Gedde [Watanabe], Mark [Hsu Syers] and Mako. When can you have it in?" I replied, "Let's see: 170-something bars of music; today is Saturday. How about Wednesday matinee?" He said, "That's what we were hoping for." I crammed for the next four days and on Wednesday, Nov. 20, I was 'Someone in a Tree.' •EVS0•