When it opened in 1919, Mizner's Everglades Club created a sensation among the wealthy and put Palm Beach on the map. WIKIPEDIA

An Impossible Tale

Addison Mizner had a career so brilliant and a history so confounding that even Stephen Sondheim couldn't tell his story.

By Robert Plunket

For any true Floridian, architect Addison Mizner is a patron saint. His signature style, Mediterranean Revival, with its red tile roofs, arched windows and doorways, and ornamental flourishes, has become the state's signature style. He was a pioneer in creating our upscale residential developments. He came up with exclusive shopping malls. He even invented the Florida room and the outdoor living area. More than anyone, he dreamt up today's Florida, both its look and its lifestyle.

But in the theater world he is somebody else entirely—the subject of that rare phenomenon, a Stephen Sondheim flop.

Four flops, to be more accurate. Over a 17-year period, composer and lyricist Sondheim, who died in December, wrote at least four different versions of Mizner's life, working with a changing cast of collaborators that included some of the biggest names in American theater. The shows were entitled at various times, "Wise Guys," "Bounce," "Gold," and "Road Show." There have been two commercial productions, two limited runs, plus countless readings, workshops and tryouts. Actors like Nathan Lane and Richard Kind have played Addison. Jane Powell (yes, *that* Jane Powell) even played his mother in one version.

And it goes even deeper. Sondheim named his poodle "Addie."

Where did Sondheim's obsession come from? And why was he never able to get it right?

At first glance the men seem to have little in common. Mizner was the son of California pioneers, one of seven siblings, an outgoing eccentric. Sondheim was the only son of a well-to-do Jewish couple in New York City, private and introverted. They had no interests or hobbies in common, and their talents lay in completely different fields.

But look a little closer and you'll see similarities. Both were idiosyncratic artists who achieved great fame and wealth. Both found their perfect mentor—Oscar Hammerstein for Sondheim and Stanford White for Mizner. And both were gay men living in a time when they had to be very careful.

To give a coherent outline of Mizner's life is impossible. This was a lesson Sondheim would learn over and over. I am beginning to learn it myself. I've tried four versions of this article, and, well, here's my latest.

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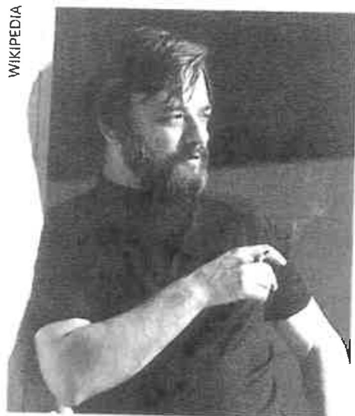
Addison Mizner circa 1922.

Addison Mizner was born in northern California 150 years ago, on Dec. 12, 1872. His family, early settlers of the region, were well-to-do. His father was a prominent lawyer, his mother a strong but benevolent presence. The six brothers and one sister had an idyllic childhood, growing up riding horses and putting on plays in the barn in a rural but rather sophisticated area just north of San Francisco.

In 1888, Mizner's politically well-connected father was appointed ambassador to Guatemala, and the family set sail down the California coast. It was an adventure that would seize young Addison's imagination and never let go. He was 16, an artistic adolescent who was already showing talent as an illustrator. Their first stop in Mazatlan, Mexico, was his first encounter with Spanish architecture. "It was the greatest day of my life," he later wrote.

Then it was on to Guatemala, where the family stayed for a year. They traveled everywhere, including to the Mayan ruins of Copan in nearby Honduras and the old capital city of Guatemala, Antigua. The town is noted as the supreme example of Spanish Colonial architecture and shows the style at its most refined and rococo. A series of earthquakes have left parts of the town in ruins, adding to its almost overwhelming charm. It left a deep impression on Mizner, and echoes of Antigua can be found in every building he designed.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A young Sondheim, at left, and the playbill from his 2003 "Bounce," a musical about Mizner.

Back home, Mizner tried several colleges but mostly ingratiated himself into the nearby San Francisco social scene, where he realized he had another skill. People liked him, particularly the ladies. He was funny and diverting and knew all about art. His unusual appearance notwithstanding—he was six foot four and his weight sometimes approached 300 pounds—he became a sought-after escort for well-heeled dowagers.

Exactly how he decided that architecture was the perfect career for him isn't known, but from 1894 to 1896, he apprenticed himself to Willis Polk, a prominent local architect and devotee of the Beaux Arts style. He became Polk's partner and designed several small projects. Life was progressing satisfactorily when the news arrived that gold had been discovered in the Yukon.

Mizner and his younger brother, Wilson, dropped everything, and with their parents cheering them on, set off for northwest Canada. They were hardly alone. Some 100,000 people were making their way there, drawn by tales of rivers flowing with flecks of gold. Here his life switched genres from an Oscar Wilde comedy of manners to a Jack London rugged adventure. This kind of abrupt change became a pattern and would turn out to bedevil Sondheim.

Mizner and Wilson bonded during their Yukon adventure, though one wonders what drew Mizner to his brother. Wilson, a budding con artist, womanizer, and on-again off-again cocaine addict, was the black sheep of the family. While Mizner was off in the hills working their claim, Wilson stayed in Dawson City, where he scammed the miners in his gambling saloon/brothel, which he operated in partnership with a woman known as Nellie the Pig.

The story of Addison Mizner is also the story of Wilson Mizner, at least according to Sondheim. The first three versions of Sondheim's show treat them equally and go to great pains to explain their relationship. And all three versions fail. They love each other, they hate each other, they blame each other, they forgive each other. But a great dramatic moment or turning point just isn't there. They're brothers and that's about it. Only in the final version is the focus primarily on Addison. And only then does the piece begin to come to life.

Addison returned from the Yukon with $39,000 and embarked on another series of adventures. He journeyed to Hawaii, where he got a job restoring the art collection of the Hawaiian royal family. He visited China, then Australia. He went back to Antigua. A compulsive shopper, he bought everything he could lay his hands on—antiques, paintings, furniture, doors, railings. Sondheim gamely put all this traveling into a clever song called "Addison's Trip."

Things become more focused in 1904, when Addison moved to New York. His life there was much like his life in San Francisco but on a much larger scale. He became more adept at meeting and amusing society's grand dames, becoming their confidant while hoping to maneuver architectural commissions. His friends from these days were a glittering lot and included Gilded Age socialite Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, Broadway star Marie

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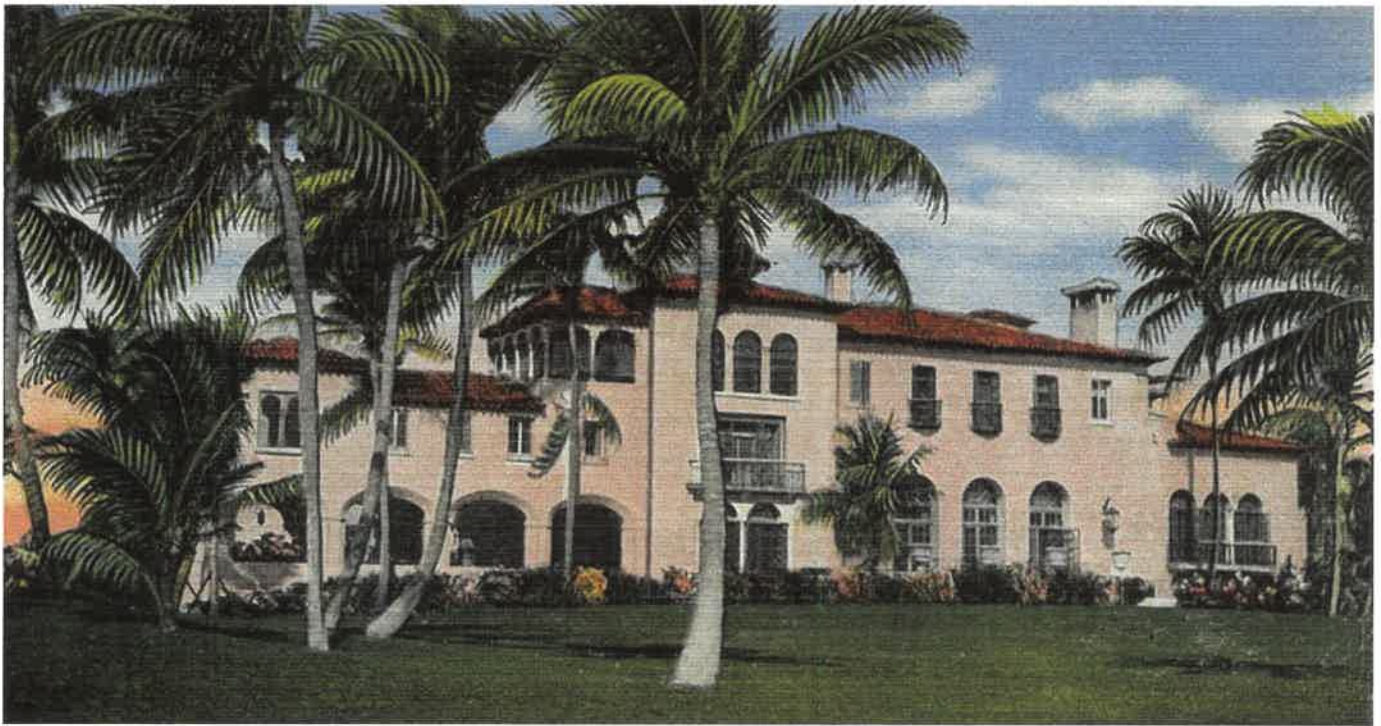

El Mirasol on Ocean Drive was Mizner's first grand Mediterranean Revival mansion in Palm Beach.

Dressler and even Irving Berlin, who was so taken with Addison that he tried to write a musical about him but finally gave up.

One can see why. His life became a blur of people and projects. His defining relationship was with Stanford White, the archetypal society architect, famous for his Beaux Art mansions in Newport, Rhode Island. Addison worked for White and learned the finer points of the various historical styles that the rich favored—and the finer points of getting commissions out of them. He designed several homes on Long Island and in Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, Wilson showed up in New York. Like his brother, he became a fixture in New York's "café society"—that mix of rich people, show business types and arty bohemians who congregated at fashionable restaurants and nightclubs. Wilson wrote a play. He became known as a "wit." His drug addiction intensified. Addison introduced him to a rich widow. He married her and she divorced him a month later. Addison got beaten up by three young men he met one night. His badly broken leg wouldn't heal.

I'm sure you're beginning to see what Sondheim was going through. It was just too much. Lots of colorful incidents but what was it adding up to? As a friend told Sondheim after watching a performance, "The trouble is, I don't know where the train is going, and it makes too many stops."

And the train hasn't even gotten to Florida yet.

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One afternoon, while still recuperating in bed, Addison was visited by his close friend Lady Colebrook. She brought along a friend of her own, a handsome young man named Paris Singer. The two men shook hands and became fast friends.

Paris was the son of Isaac Singer, the founder of the Singer Sewing Machine Company and one of the wealthiest men in the country. Paris was Isaac's 20th child; after a while he and his third wife ran out of names and began naming the children after the city where they were born.

Paris was rich, handsome and artistically inclined. He even dabbled in architecture himself. No doubt Addison was smitten, but Paris was resolutely, even scandalously, heterosexual. His romance with dancer Isadora Duncan was one of the great tabloid stories of the era. Their tempestuous affair produced a son who drowned in the river Seine in an automobile accident.

Singer insisted that Addison come with him to Palm Beach, where the sunshine would speed his recovery. At that time—1918—Palm Beach was a little town just beginning to attract wealthy winter residents. There were two hotels, but not much else. True kindred spirits—ambitious, artistic and out to prove themselves—the two men immediately saw the possibilities.

After a quick remodel of Paris's home on Peruvian Avenue, they moved on to build another project for Paris, a convalescent hospital for officers injured in World War I. But the war ended while the building was being designed, and they rethought the project as a lavish, exclusive club.

The Everglades Club, which opened on Jan. 15, 1919, rocked the world of the very rich and put Palm Beach on the map. This was something new. A castle in Spain, almost literally, complete with a tower overlooking the town. Inside was a grand salon, 44 by 85 feet, with a six-and-a half-foot high fireplace, plus a dining room that seated 400. Here at last was the project that Addison had been waiting for; at age 47, he had found his architectural voice.

In the next seven years Addison designed an astonishing 67 buildings in Palm Beach. Some were constructed on a scale that is hard to imagine these days. El Mirasol (built for Ned and Eva Stokesbury of Philadelphia) had a garage for 40 cars and its own

zoo. Playa Riente (commissioned by Joshua and Nell Cosden in 1923) was three times larger, with a spectacular 60-foot-long entrance hall with a vaulted Gothic ceiling and a second-floor ballroom that appeared to float over the ocean.

The Mizner mansions were all Mediterranean Revival, with the various styles of the region (plus Latin America) combined and reinterpreted. Think Spanish cloisters in a Venetian palazzo with Moorish pillars, all blended into a structure that looked like it had been standing there for hundreds of years. In fact, Mizner used to take chains and beat them against the brand-new stucco to make it look old and weathered.

A Mizner façade tended to be simple, almost austere. You only got the full effect when you went inside. There you would find courtyards, grand stairways, fountains, gardens, loggias (the granddaddy of the Florida room), mammoth fireplaces, vast rooms, all of them decorated by Mizner. (Only on the ground floor, though. "I don't care what people do in their bedrooms," he was famous for saying.) His furniture and building-material business, which produced authentic-looking Spanish-style pottery, cast-stone door and window surrounds, barrel tiles and decorative wrought iron, became Palm Beach's biggest industry, or more likely, its only industry.

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For himself, Addison built the Villa Mizner. On Worth Avenue, right across the street from the Everglades Club, it was an early example of a mixed-use building, with offices and apartments on the lower three floors and the top two serving as his residence. He also built a collection of charming shops surrounding the villa. At the west end of Worth Avenue, Addison's club, villa and shops became and remain the very heart of Palm Beach. At Villa Mizner, he entertained the leading lights of Palm Beach with his monkey Johnnie Brown on his shoulder. (Johnnie's grave is in Palm Beach's only official cemetery.) Addison was known as a tireless worker, instructing his artisans in the skills he had picked up over the years, hands-on in a way few architects are. Everybody liked him, not just the rich ladies.

Then Wilson showed up.

News of Addison's success was just too tempting. Soon the brothers were dreaming up a grandiose new scheme: They would design and build a brand-new city for the rich. It would be like Palm Beach, only bigger and better. Their idea made a kind of sense in Florida's fevered real-estate market. Addison's genius was well-known, and Florida was attracting a rush of Northern buyers, with prices escalating at a heart-pounding rate.

They found a little farming community (population 100) down the coast called Boca Ratone and assembled 16,000 acres. They dropped the "e" from the town's name and began laying it out. Addison designed a main street called El Camino Real that was 20 lanes wide. There would be miles of canals, several hotels, including a Ritz-Carlton, a 400-seat theater, and all the architecture would be in the Spanish style. And, of course, every detail would be personally supervised by Addison Mizner, described in their promotional material as "the Genius of Planners, Poet of Architects, Foremost Thinker of the Future." A board of directors was put together that was as grand as the brother's ambitions: two Vanderbilts, a DuPont, the Duchess of Sutherland, Irving Berlin, Elizabeth Arden.

Things got off to a sensational start, thanks to a publicity campaign that pulled out all the stops. Boca Raton was going to be

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One of the first in Mizner's doomed Boca Ratron development, this Mediterranean-inspired house, designed for film executive Fred Aiken, is now historically designated.

the most beautiful city in the world, with every possible amenity. Advertisements combined breathless hype, snob appeal and the promise of huge profits for investors. As one ad proclaimed, "The owners and controllers of the Mizner Development Corporation are a group of very rich men—men of unlimited means, who propose to build from the creative genius of Addison Mizner, what will probably be the most wonderful resort city in the world."

For a few months, the project lived up to the hype, with investors lining up to reserve lots. On May 14, 1925, the first day of sales, automobiles jammed the streets of West Palm Beach, and $2.1 million surged in, a record for Florida opening-day land sales.

Mizner's buildings define the soul of Florida—a place of fantasy, reinvention and exotic glamour.

A second offering brought in another $2 million in reservations. Mizner and his partners bought more land, and 350 workmen began clearing the first lots and a golf course.

But by fall, sales began to slow. Northern newspapers were warning of fraudulent Florida land schemes, the overwhelmed railroads couldn't deliver construction materials quickly enough, and Palm Beach didn't have enough housing for all the workers, visitors and investors who were coming. The Mizners were promising things that didn't exist, and the board started to get nervous. They told Addison to get rid of his brother, who was masterminding what was increasingly seen as a real estate scam. Board members resigned, sales collapsed, and in six months Boca Raton became the poster child for the 1925 collapse of the Florida land boom. A catastrophic hurricane that devastated South Florida in 1926 drove the final nail into the development coffin.

Wilson slunk off to California, where he wrote screenplays and became co-owner of the Brown Derby restaurant (which was actually shaped like a brown derby). Addison went back to the Villa Mizner and settled into Depression-era Palm Beach life. Every now and then a little job came his way. The mayor felt sorry for him and commissioned him to design a fountain for the front of City Hall. He got a new monkey named Deuteronomy. People marveled at how contented and at peace he seemed. He died in February 1933. Wilson died two months later.

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What are we to make of all this? It certainly has everything—riveting incidents, money and glamour, a good brother/bad brother and several monkeys; and it's all set at key moments in one of the most colorful periods of American history.

But what's the story? Sondheim and his collaborators would discuss this endlessly. At first they saw the brothers as cynical manipulators but with different temperaments. Wilson was the schemer; Addison was the dreamer. Their story was presented as a sort of 1940s road movie, the kind Bing Crosby and Bob Hope used to make, performed in a vaudeville style, with broad comedy and music that was a pastiche of the era. Everything was on the surface. It was fast-moving, picaresque, and—hopefully—fun.

The reaction of the audience, however, was lukewarm. Something was missing. In the next version the authors developed the convoluted relationship between the brothers and their parents. This gave the show more depth. It became more sober and realistic, but even less enjoyable.

Director Hal Prince, a longtime collaborator of Sondheim, joined the team for the third try. He pointed out that the show had no love interest. There was no sexual tension, an important element in a Broadway musical. So they added some—a dancehall girl from the Yukon who the brothers meet and re-meet as all three rise socially and financially. This made the show even worse, and the girl was quickly dropped.

For the final version they kept the love interest but changed the gender. A Paris Singer character was written in for Addison to fall in love with. This gave Sondheim the chance to write his first specifically gay romance, and the show improved tremendously. It finally found an emotional center via a great Sondheim love song—"The Best Thing That Has Ever Happened to Me."

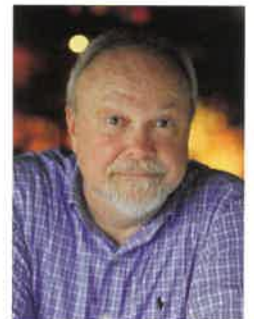
But it still didn't work. Something was missing. Could it be ... architecture?

Indeed, architecture barely figures into any of the versions. Sondheim said that Sam Mendes, director of the second version, told him that Addison "wasn't a major enough talent in the history of architecture" to get any mileage out of that angle. Addison's buildings are presented as part of the various schemes to bilk people out of money.

The moral here is, never listen to Sam Mendes. True, some architectural academicians still see Mizner as a copyist who came up with nothing new. No modern white glass boxes, no brutal concrete slabs that express function.

But his buildings define the soul of Florida. The state, the last frontier and most fabled destination in America, is a place of fantasy, of reinvention, of exotic glamour. Every McMansion in Orlando can be traced directly back to those 67 houses in Palm Beach. Every clubhouse in every gated community, indeed, in every mobile home park, is descended from the Everglades Club. And those thousands of middle-class Med Rev tract houses that blanket the state—they're Mizner, too. Their entrance porticos with their pillars and domes show the aspirational quality that Mizner understood so well. What a shame that Sondheim never saw this. With the same brilliance with which he explained the creation of a painting in "Sunday in the Park with George," he could have illuminated the romantic genius of the man who invented Florida, beautiful building by beautiful building. What a show that would have been.

For a while it seemed like it still might happen. The last line of the final production declared, "Sooner or later we'll get it right." But Sondheim died before that could happen. He leaves Addison in artistic limbo: a fabulous character still waiting for another genius to tell his story. ■



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