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BJ: A Musical Romp

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Candidate for B.F.A. Degrees in Musical Theatre & Economics
and Renée Crown University Honors

May/2009

Honors Capstone Project in Musical Theatre

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
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Samuel Gorovitz

Date: _____

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Abstract

Through a series of rather unpredictable events, I was asked to write a piano and vocal score for an original musical. After over two years of working on the project, I am very pleased with the size and scope of the finished product, but more importantly, I feel that I actually understand the job of a musical composer. It was my misconception that a composer only writes melodies that are catchy and sound fun to sing. After researching the process of other musical composers, it became evident that my task was to simply tell a story, but through a different medium than speech. Within the context of musical theatre, music is simply another tool a character has to tell their story. If a song does not further the story or theme of the play, then it should be cut from the show.

In *BJ: A Musical Romp* the story is one of growing up and taking one's first step into adulthood and independence. In a nutshell, the show is about discovering how to melt one's social barriers so that the characters can begin to live comfortably within their own skin. My job was to augment the theme, lines, and lyrics of the show with a musical element that clearly conveys the intention of every character. Throughout the writing process, I have only reinforced my belief that music is a uniquely strong medium for storytelling, for it can communicate a character's speech and thoughts at the same time, conveying the outward and inner life of a character simultaneously.

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Advice

If someone on a whim asks you to collaborate on a project that you know can only stretch you artistically, do it. You will be surprised at what starts to come out as you slowly peel back the layers...

Reflective Essay

Peter Dagger approached me on the second floor of the Archbold Theatre Complex in November of my sophomore year with a curiously inquisitive expression adorning his face. I was naturally compelled to ask what he wanted, and he appropriately shrugged his shoulders as if to signal all he wanted was a 'small' favor that wouldn't take up much of my time. It was immediately evident that he was going to ask for a favor of epic proportions.

PETER

Well...I was working on this script for the past two months, and I want to make it into a full musical, but I don't write music.

ERIC

...so you want me to write the music?

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Yeah, that would be great! I even have lyrics already written.

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Well, I'll take a look, but I'm not making any promises.

PETER

Great! Perfect. Why don't you work a little on the first number, and we can meet in a week or so to see what you think?

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Ok, that's fair enough. Hey, what's the show about anyway?

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Um, blowjobs. Look, I got to run, but I'll see you next week!

...and that's how I got coaxed into writing the music to a show that is apparently about blowjobs. At this point the whole ordeal of meeting Peter in the hallway was sufficiently perplexing that I decided to take a nap for my sanity. I stirred back to life a few hours later, opened Peter's manuscript to page one, and for the first time entered the not so distant world of *BJ: A Musical Romp*.

First of all, just to get this out of the way, the show is not about blowjobs. The protagonist is BJ, which stands for Benyamin Jeremiah, and he is a home-schooled boy entering his freshman year of college. Within the first few pages the five other characters were quickly introduced, and it became evident that Peter created a very small but very eclectic cast. Along with BJ, Peter included BJ's Mother, who is entirely overprotective, Destiny - a young student with a notorious oral fixation, Mullins - BJ's gay RA, Gabriel - a female mathlete, and Jack - BJ's 'gangsta' roommate. Without a doubt, Peter had written a comedy, but by the end of the play, I was actually very impressed with the underlying message. While the play is filled with insane coincidences and hilarious social encounters, Peter included an underlying innocence to all his characters that gave the whole story depth. Peter allowed the viewer to see that all his characters are yearning for acceptance, and they only exude a given stereotype because they're too afraid to be themselves. As the facades of the characters begin to dissolve, we see these characters grow and mature into adulthood, beginning the fundamental transformation that is intrinsically indicative to the college experience.

I liked Peter's script enough to begin floating melodies through my head. Still, I had never written a musical score before, and felt very unprepared to

undertake a project of such scope. I had to better define my role as the composer within the context of musical theatre so that I could garner some direction.

I turned to Stephen Sondheim, the composer and lyricist of several musicals, including *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Company*, to name a few. I had written a paper on him in my *History of Musical Theatre* class, and was intrigued by his relationship with Oscar Hammerstein II (of Rodgers & Hammerstein). Hammerstein was the parent of a childhood friend, and Sondheim's most influential mentor. Sondheim met Hammerstein right before he and Richard Rogers transformed musical theatre with *Oklahoma!*. Rodgers & Hammerstein were defying convention by centering all their work on the story. For the first time, the separate components of lyric, music, and choreography only existed to further the telling of the story. "...Hammerstein wrote lyrics as natural dialogue, without drawing attention to them" (Flinn 220). The lyrics were not clever for clever's sake, but rather fit the given circumstances of the character singing them. In addition, lyrics were written before the melody. "...Hammerstein carefully created his lyrics out of the story and characters, then submitted them to the composer" (220). In this manner, the music had to bolster what the character is speaking lyrically. Sondheim reflects on this new phenomenon, noting, "...after the Rodgers and Hammerstein revolution, songs became part of the story, as opposed to just entertainments in between comedy scenes" (Edwardes 8).

It soon became evident that my job was not to create 'nice' music, but to reinforce Peter's story through another medium. By accident we were already

working in the right direction, lyrics first, music second. I knew what the characters were saying, but now I got to write *how* they say it. Ideally, the melody that the character sings should convey the intention of the character at that point in time, and the accompaniment provides the paralinguistic elements of speech and thought. The music is the subtext, telling the audience exactly what the character wants, even if the lyric is an outward lie to the other present characters.

After reading the play several times, getting to know the characters inside and out, and understanding what they wanted in every scene and song, I began to improvise, with the given lyrics, the musical themes that would fit their respective personalities and desires. For each song, I would try several ideas and spend about a week or two developing them until I settled upon one final central idea.

After choosing this theme, the rough sketch of the song had been completed and an overall want or intention was revealed by using the music as the character's subtext. After gaining the main musical idea for a song, I looked at the moments before and after the song in the script, so that I could musically sculpt what emotional place the character was coming from, and where the song had to lead them by the end. Then, after second guessing and tweaking by the piano for a few days, I began to get very picky. I would change slight nuances in the accompaniment or melodic line so that they would be word specific. At this point if I did not care for a particular lyric, I would meet with Peter and we would discuss the various changes that needed to be made. He would also critique the piece musically, for if the character's ideas did not translate to the music, they needed to be revised.

Finally, the piece could begin to be polished, and it was slightly altered by looking over it again and again. For about a week or more I would open the piece every night and play through it, just to see if something struck me differently. It is almost ridiculous to consider the amount of time used to play through a piece again and again in order to change just a handful of notes or rhythms, but those final revisions really do make the piece sound polished and fluid. I would then have another actor come in to sing the piece. At this point, the music should seem to flow from the character. If it seems that the intention has to be fabricated by the actor, then I as the composer did not do my job to make it sound realistic and specific to the character's current moment in time.

In order to best illustrate my job in the formation of this musical, I thought I would break down my process on the newest song, *Going Down a Different Road*.

In the context of the show, *Going Down a Different Road* opens the second act, and is sung by the three women who are to themselves alone. Each woman reacts to their experience so far, and admits in the song that they each have a greater potential than they are fulfilling. All of them have their own verse and then combine at the end of the number to show that while each are in their own place, they all share the same collective sentiment. By the end of the song, every character has to discover that they have the power to be who they want to be in life, but only they have the ability to fulfill their potential.

To me it is clear that these characters are restless and are viewing college as a potential clean slate to finally tackle problems of loneliness, overprotection, and phoniness. Since they are restless, I begin the number with a F5/Bb, or F

suspension chord to capture the unease. The first seven measures are meant to mimic the thoughts of Gabriel as she tries to put her thoughts into words, and at measure 8 the bass line changes to the third of the root chord in order to illustrate that the words have finally come.

When Gabriel starts to sing, she repeats the first melodic line three times in order to show the change on her fourth line, “It could be time for something new” (Dagger/Jarboe 83). The music finally changes when she knows it is time for ‘something new.’ In measure 19, Gabriel’s utterance of ‘myself’ is rhythmically different from the accompaniment to show that she is indeed alone, even separate from the music. The accompaniment starts up in the second half of 21 to show the thought that leads to the line “It could be time for something new” (83). Since the music always illustrates the thoughts of the character, the music should always be slightly ahead of the lyric in telling us where the character is headed, for a character formulates a thought before they speak it.

On Gabriel’s next line, “And now, I stand here with a guy” (84), more emphasis is given to the first beats of measures 26, 27, and 28 to show how Gabriel is grounding herself in her idea for change. The next line of “A guy I could possibly adore” (84) breaks from the downward motion of the first three allowing Gabriel to begin to live in this ‘new’ place.

At measure 34 she introduces some doubt and reservations to this idea of change, and the melody goes up at the end of each question, just as someone’s voice would when they question themselves. In addition, the rhythm of the accompaniment almost halts as the thoughts of Gabriel have shifted from living her fantasy to critiquing the feasibility of the fantasy.

At measure 38, she begins to enter the fantasy again, but stops halfway through measure 39 with the original F suspended chord, signaling another new twist. This new thought leads us to the next section where Gabriel admits that, “There’s so much more inside of me than just numbers and geometry” (85). In a sense, she’s trying to justify that she deserves a man because she has so much that she wants to give to and share with another person.

In measures 48-51, the music begins to consolidate all the thoughts Gabriel has had so far into the major thought of the refrain, “I could go down a different road” (86). Measures 48-51 build to beat three of measure 51 where there is one big final F suspension chord as Gabriel finally concludes that she has the power to change herself, and for the first time, believes she can grow into the person she wants to be. It is at this point that her thoughts are clear, and the limitations are boundless.

In measure 60 Gabriel returns to asking herself if this change is actually possible, and the accompaniment shifts for a moment of self-reflection on the lyric, “Could there really be someone I love as much as math?” (87). This thought quickly ends with the F suspension chord back to the music of the refrain signaling to the audience that Gabriel has decided that ‘yes’ is the answer to this question, and that she will continue to press on with her goal of pursuing love.

Mother is the second character to enter the song, and her verse is immediately softer as she recounts meeting BJ’s father on her first day of college. The music becomes much more intimate as she describes her past with, “Those days I was a fair and dainty flower, and he plucked my innocence away” (88).

Essentially, BJ's father knocked her up and quickly abandoned her to raise BJ alone, explaining why she has been such an overprotective parent.

From measures 84 through 98, Mother tries to justify her sheltered upbringing of BJ, insisting that her intentions were to give BJ more opportunity than she had herself. However, after each phrase there is silence in the music to show that while Mother is trying to justify her actions, there is a tangible doubt within her that BJ's sheltered upbringing might do more harm than good in the end.

Musically, the bass line shifts to the third of the chord starting in measure 96 to begin a shift to the next section of Mother's lyrics which starts on measure 100. She sings, "There's so much more inside of me that the tyrant that you think you see" (89-90) to the same melody as Gabriel, for they both want to expand themselves in their everyday life.

Mother's central question comes back in measures 108-113 where she states, "There's so much more I want for him! Should I hold him back or let him swim?" (90). The music shifts from an active place of change to a place of questioning, but as it becomes clearer to her that she needs to let BJ be free, the drive of the music picks up again in measure 112.

The F suspension chord returns in measure 113 just before the refrain to be the point at which Mother decides that she can change and 'go down a different road.' At measure 122 she poses one last question with, "Could I really make a change after all these years?" (91), and the drive is again halted as she resists changing for this final time. Again, the F suspension chord ends this

momentary halt, and the music returns to the drive at the refrain, signaling to the audience that the answer to the posed question is, ‘yes, I can change.’

Finally, Destiny makes her entrance. Destiny wants to feel accepted just like Gabriel, and feels at this point that she could be herself for the first time if she could just find the right guy. She thinks she has found that guy in BJ, and she is almost bursting with excitement at the realization that maybe she’s found the right guy after all. Musically, Destiny sings long, extended phrases over a maze of busy notes in the piano to convey her pent up excitement. Much of this energy comes to a boil at measure 150 where she is herself for the first time in the play, revealing, “...the Destiny underneath” (94).

At measure 162, Destiny sings the same melody that Gabriel and Mother say on, “There’s so much more inside of me,” again reaffirming that the Destiny we have seen up to this point is not the entirety of the character. She wants to live as herself, but has been too afraid to relax her social barriers.

The F suspension chord returns right before the refrain in measure 175, again to reaffirm Destiny’s realization that she can change the direction of her life. She can love if she chooses to, but she has to overcome the fear of rejection.

At measure 192, the three women come and sing together for the first time in three part harmony, and the lyric changes from ‘I could go down a different road’ to “We’re going down a different road,” (97). They have decided to shift their behavior, and are celebrating this new discovery. Throughout the next few pages, the harmonies continually build suspense and relax it, allowing

the women to constantly be re-energized with the excitement of the change in their approach to life.

As they drive forward to the end, the women have time for one last suspension and release. At measure 224, the women sing at their closest interval, only one whole step each, in order to convey all the excitement and tension of the whole number. This tension releases to the last sung notes in 228-229 where the women hold a straight major chord communicating the clarity of the new path they are now on. Furthermore, the song ends on a F5/F chord that is not suspended for they have finally arrived to their new place. The F Suspension chord theme that has followed the women through the entire song finally resolves as they resolve the battle between their inner fears and reservations and their ultimate goals.

While this recount of the process is extremely truncated, it does give some glimpse into the emotions and thoughts I am attempting to paint musically. Finally, I will say that when possible, I like to use melodies that convey the intention of the character, but are sufficiently catchy to be sung by the audience upon their exit. I figure that if people are singing your songs, they are more likely to ponder the questions that the songs bring to life, creating a more active relationship with the play and their life. This brings me to a point made by Gilbert Cates, the fourteen time producer of the Academy Awards whom I met this past Spring Break in SU Drama's Sorkin Practicum. He mentioned that, "In order for art to have a profound effect on the audience, it has to entertain. People don't like to be lectured, but if they're interested, they'll listen to everything else you're trying to say" (Cates). I do agree with this point, and hope

that while *BJ: A Musical Romp* is a very funny show, the audience does leave the performance questioning if they are contently living to their highest potential. I do not expect them to necessarily make a life-changing decision, but rather to just enjoy a small pause as the hummed melody or lyric suddenly catches them off-guard. Within the silence of that small pause, I know that I have done my job.

Works Cited

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Appendix 1

It's the first day of the first week of the first year...
Of college.

BJ

A Musical Romp

DAGGER AND JARBOE PRESENT 'BJ: A MUSICAL ROMP' KATE BODENHEIMER DJ BUCCIARELLI
ROLLIE HERMOSO ALICIA KRKAUER AARON J LIBBY JESSICA MAZO
BOOK AND LYRICS PETER DAGGER MUSIC ERIC JARBOE DIRECTOR PETER DAGGER
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR JAKE KEEFE STAGE MANAGER ABBY SAVITEER

THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 8:00
FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 8:00
SUNDAY, APRIL 8, 8:00
TICKETS: 3 DOLLARS

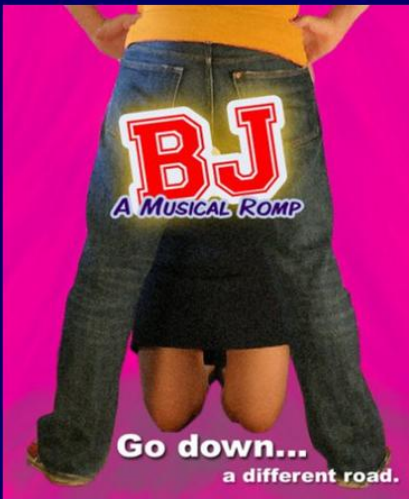
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ARTS FOUNDATION INC.

JAZZ CENTRAL
441 E. WASHINGTON ST.
SYRACUSE, NY
13202



© Dan Kurtz

You're Invited!



BJ: A MUSICAL ROMP

Go down...
a different road.

Date: 08/11/2008
Time: 7:00 PM
Syracuse University Lubin House
11 East 61st Street
New York, NY 10065

NYC READING

Book & Lyrics by Peter Dagger

Music by Eric Jarboe

RSVP:

http://sudrama.org/rsvp_play808.htm

A fresh new musical by a fresh new team! *BJ: A Musical Romp* follows Benjamin Jeremiah's first interaction with school life outside of his living room. While most braved the school bus for the first time in Kindergarten, BJ has been home schooled until the advent of his college years, when his over-bearing mother finally succumbs to the fact that 'Home University' does not exist. Within no time, he stumbles across an aggressive sexually charged seductress with a notorious oral fixation, a beer loving, hopeless romantic, a mathlete who loves, well, math and a gay RA who has shown a particular interest in the presence of kosher meat. With eleven original songs, hilarious social encounters, and an overall air of 'awxy,' *BJ* is sure to bring back those feelings of college we all remember, and perhaps, forgot.

Written Summary

Peter Dagger approached me on the second floor of the Archbold Theatre Complex in November of my sophomore year with a curiously inquisitive expression adorning his face. I was naturally compelled to ask what he wanted, and he appropriately shrugged his shoulders as if to signal all he wanted was a 'small' favor that wouldn't take up much of my time. It was immediately evident that he was going to ask for a favor of epic proportions.

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