

Podcast: Great Musical Theatre

Richard Gay, Narrator & Producer: Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. Joining the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Jeff Frederick, are Nathan Thomas and Katie DeFiglio. Their topic is Great American Musical Theatre. Now get ready for 30 Brave Minutes.

Jeff Frederick: The Greeks did it; the Romans, too. Throughout the middle ages, the Renaissance, and the rise of early modern Europe, it is there as well. It is the linkage of music and story, songs, movement and plot. Musical theatre can be uproarious or emotional, heartfelt or thought-provoking, patriotic or indicative of a world many of us rarely see. Musicals can open doors to meaningful conversations about social issues, race, class, gender, or identity. They can be produced, acted, and directed through community theatre with well-meaning amateurs, or in sold-out Broadway venues where the average ticket price on the great white way is over \$100. If you find yourself humming 'My Shot' from Hamilton, you're not alone. And even if that show is not your cup of tea chances are there's a Gershwin, a Rodgers and Hammerstein, a Sondheim, an Andrew Lloyd Webber or a Gilbert and Sullivan that gets your toes tapping. Have you ever found yourself in an interesting coffee, beer or wine conversation about which Jerome Robbins production was most innovative? If so, you are definitely a musical theater person. What makes musical theatre so great is the symmetry between music and lyrics. Singing, dancing, and acting all synchs together in a whirl of acts and scenes. Set against a sea of creative ideas and personalities, choreographers, performers, producers, and directors work together with costumers, musicians, orchestras, set designers, lighting directors, and a blizzard of others who come together to produce what looks effortless and magical on the stage but surely is not. Sometimes the production resonates with such a wide audience that we see it multiple times. Phantom of the Opera opened in 1988 and has been staged well over 12,000 times. The Lion King grossed over a billion dollars. In a good year Broadway sells about 13 million seats. A Broadway show is one stage to a theater with 500 or more seats. Smaller venues are considered Off-Broadway. The actual street Broadway is one of the longest ones in New York City, but since the size of the theater determines the official Broadway status, not the address, it means you have Off-Broadway theaters actually located on Broadway and Broadway theaters physically located off the actual Broadway street. Confused? It's okay. In the end it is all about the music and the dance and the storytelling and the costumes and the experience, not about the curious patch of details. Joining me today to talk about musical

theater are Nathan Thomas and Katie DeFiglio, veteran musicians, performers, directors, theatre lovers, educators and experts. Welcome you all.

Thomas and DeFiglio: Thanks.

Frederick: So, what was the first musical you remember seeing or listening to that hooked you? And what about it was so mesmerizing?

DeFiglio: Well, for me it was West Side Story, the recording of it, the movie. I just loved it. I grew up seeing all those movie musicals, Sound of Music, and so that was really my first experience just hearing it and, of course, I would act out all the scenes in my bedroom. (laughs) I knew every part from the soundtrack, but the first Broadway show in New York City that I saw, I will never forget. It was Phantom of the Opera in the 90s and I just was so overwhelmed. The opening scene is the auction and everything is just kind of dark and as soon as the overture starts and then everything kind of comes to the flashback and the chandelier lifts off the stage and comes out into the theater and I just burst into tears, I was so overwhelmed. And had just such a feeling of joy and just that experience, I didn't even know, and I was completely hooked after that.

Frederick: That's great. What about you, Nathan?

Thomas: I was trying to remember and because I'm old I have no idea what the first thing was. I was lucky enough to grow up on the campus of a major state university and so we had a bunch of touring productions come in, so I've been seeing things since I was very small. But like Dr. DeFiglio, I could tell you that the first Broadway production for me was Les Miserables. And because of the circumstances surrounding it I got a really good seat. I was on the eighth row aisle, right up front. I was just, again knocked out by the professionalism of every aspect, right. I'd seen good actors and I'd heard good musicians but I hadn't ever seen something that was good at every level. And they were just amazing. I was already in graduate school at that time and pursuing some of the things that I liked to do and I knew at that point that I was in the right place.

Frederick: It's just something about that environment when everything comes together and it's just sort of, as you both described, just a little bit overwhelming and you're almost like, "Am I really here? Am I really watching this?"

Thomas: Yeah, it's magical.

Frederick: Very cool. So how do you impress all of this passion on your students? And how do you develop this in them?

DeFiglio: The first thing is just to go see shows. There's so much out there, so just start to experience it. There's just a lot of options. You may not like every style of it but get out there and be open to it, I think is the most important part.

Thomas: I think, mostly, for me, it's about demonstrating my enthusiasm for it and then kind of trying to explain what about it I am enthusiastic about, because it is going to be something different for everybody. It's not that I'm trying to convert people to the way of musical theater, but I think there's something in musical theater for everybody, as you mentioned in your introduction. There's such a wide range, and you don't have to like *Mama Mia* to like *Hamilton*, and you don't have to like *Hamilton* to like *The Producers*, right? And I think it's too easy to say, oh, I don't like musicals because you don't like a musical you saw. And not think, well, okay, I didn't like that experience, but what about that experience didn't I like? Was it poorly done, was it a bad show, or was it just not a style I'm comfortable with. I think in general, a lot of us are a little too easy to dismiss a genre, a sort of experience by having had one bad experience of some kind and not really focusing in on "okay, well, maybe that was that experience. Maybe I had a bad breakfast that day and I was predisposed to not liking..." (laughter).

Frederick: I'm struck by similarity between previous podcasts we have done on Great Books and Great Works of Art, in the sense that you don't have to understand every part of it and you don't have to know all of what's going on to just appreciate it.

Thomas: Yeah, and I was thinking about this earlier in a kind of preparation for this. We did a musical here in January called *Adding Machine* that was very advanced musically. And I think if that had been anybody's first musical that would have been a kind of off-putting experience, right? It's not only advance musically, but it's based on an expressionistic play from the 20s and the play itself, and then the musical response to it kind of assumes a certain knowledge of the history of either theatre or musical theatre, right, so it has a built-in audience, but it's not the audience that's just coming in off the street, necessarily. Not that there's nothing in that for you, if you don't completely understand it but that you have a deeper understanding and a better appreciation for it if you have had a wider experience of stuff coming into it. I think there are lots of musicals like that. Even *Hamilton*, which is really accessible, I think to people, especially people of a younger generation than myself. There are references in there that you appreciate more if you have the history, if you understand what the references are. Whereas last spring we did *Seussical*, Dr. DeFiglio was in the cast and I think that is really accessible for all. Not that the music is not challenging, it is still very effectively written and represents great craft, but it is easy to come in and not know anything and still appreciate it.

Frederick: I remember a couple years ago you did one and I can't remember the exact title, but it was very somber and fairly dark and it had a lot of overtones to mental health issues and you are probably remembering the one I'm thinking of.

Thomas: Next to Normal.

Frederick: Yes, that's right, Next to Normal. I was amazed at how you could use movement and song to really communicate such really thoughtful and dark topics. I remember my wife and I drove home that night just kind of talking about how all of those things came together. So, take us inside a little bit. I mean from a performer and a producer or director's perspective, what are the different parts? What are the essential ingredients of a great production?

Thomas: Musical Theatre is made up of multiple elements. Obviously the performance aspect is acting, singing and dance. They come together in various percentages for different shows and then there are all the kind of ancillary technical elements. So there's a set design, there's a lighting design, all of the stuff you mentioned. What I would just say about any of that is everything that you see or hear or experience as an audience member is the result of a decision. Sometimes it's a decision made explicitly by the performer or by the director or by the set designer or the costume designer. But there are also decisions that we make by not having addressed them and I think as an audience member you sit wherever you sit and you say what is trying to be conveyed to me? What are they trying to tell me here? What goes into it is the process of making all those decisions. It starts with the author because it always starts with the author. They write the script and they write the music and they write the lyrics, and they do the orchestrations and tons of work. At the University level tons of work is put into a show before it ever becomes, now we are going to produce it. But then, at this point we've chosen our spring show. Now we get to choose the cast. Who amongst our group is going to be which part and everything that happens is the result of decision-making. Where do they stand? Are they looking at each other or not? What's he wearing? What's she not wearing? No, that's not the show... It's a massive amount of work and it's kind of never enough time to do it, which is part of the fun. I got taught in my graduate training that you do theater in the time available. You make the schedule and then you say we're opening on this day, whether we're ready or not. Right?

Frederick: The show must go on.

Thomas: Exactly. And then you have to figure out, okay, what is the best use of the time I have? We're going to make these decisions and we're going to let those other things go by because this is what it is. And then it's all about okay, we're going to put this up and we're going to let people see it.

Frederick: And the environment, whether you're doing this on campus with student talent or whether you're doing this in a much larger production, everybody in the process is an artist, right? And the creative dialectic is probably a little challenging every once in a while when somebody says that I want to do it this way, or I want to sing that. These are the notes I think we should punch. How do you guys work all of that together?

DeFiglio: Well, yes, as a performer, the nuts and bolts are the script. You know, you get your score and you learn the dialogue. You learn all of that and it is a process. That's my favorite part, is the rehearsal. It is exploring things, doing the research necessary with the character, how, maybe it's been done before or how I respond to that role and yeah, how you interact with everyone else and you know, I call it like even just plain. Okay, now that we've learned the basic structure and then we work with the director, the costumes, all of that together and I've worked with many directors and some are very okay, you take one step here. I want you to say the line like this. And then I've had others where it's kind of, all right, whatever you want to do. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, so it's an exploration. And yeah and you have to trust the director, too, that if something's not working, they will see it and they will be like this isn't working. That can also happen where people are like oh no, I'm going to do this and just trust, trust that the person seeing the whole picture will fix it if it needs to be fixed.

Frederick: So as a performer, how do you initiate that conversation with the director to say I really think the character would do this? How do you initiate that? And then, Nathan, I'm going to come to you as a director, how do you embrace that conversation, and find, you know where you guys can kind of find middle ground?

DeFiglio: Right. I think that starts early in the process where you're just starting to get ideas. I mean things can change through the rehearsal period, so I'm always very open and I'd like to hear what the director's ideas are. And if I have ideas, to have it as a dialogue. Not just one way and that's what I love about it because there may be something that I hadn't thought of or maybe they haven't, you know, if you were in one role, you know, that's really what you're focused on. And so then seeing how it fits into the big picture. So I think yeah, the best working relationships is that you can have that dialogue and that it's open and that definitely, in Seussical, I felt that, but it's like we're going to explore this and here's some things to think about and you know, it was great. So I think keeping that dialogue open on both parts.

Thomas: Absolutely. I'm going to try to pick up all this and some other stuff as well, because one of the things that you just said reminded me of something, and made we want to clarify a thing that I just said about decisions, right? So everything that an audience sees is the result of a decision, but it is not necessarily a decision that is arrived at easily and what the rehearsal process is for, is to try different answers to various questions and then settle on what is the best decision for each kind of individual moment. And that should be the process. That's my goal with the process, and working with an actor, is okay. Here's the way you want to try it. I'm going to let you do it exactly that way, and let's see how that feels and how that works. I'll let you know what I think about it and you let me know what you think about it. Maybe let's try it this other way and see how that feels. What I try to do is always make sure that if I have a different idea from what an actor wants to do, I'll say, try it this way and see how it feels. We're

just trying it. And then, if they're truly resistant to it, then I'm never going to make an actor do something, because the actor has to be the one performing. So the actor has to buy into whatever the choice is. But it's the director's job, somebody has to be in charge and somebody has to, keep the unified theory, right? You mentioned Jerome Robbins and he's the king of unified theory. Here is what the play is about and I get to make decisions about it. Does everything that is happening in the next two hours reflect that and come from that theory? And sometimes the process of that, making sure that everybody buys into this is what the play is about. This is the story we're telling. You have to remind people because each of us gets so caught up in, but this is my lane, this is what I know how to do. Let me do my thing. Okay, I love your thing but it doesn't fit here.

Frederick: And in a two hour production as you're going through the process, if on one given day, you are only going to cover 10 or 15 minutes of the production, but you're going to approach it a bunch of different ways. You're trying to figure out how all these different pieces for this scene or this act, or this song will fit into what you might or might not do with the next one. You are a mad scientist, sir.

Thomas: I am. I am, in fact, but often enough, I always have ideas. I never have decisions made when I get in the rehearsal room and that drives some actors nuts, but what I really like to do is say here's what I think I know about this play. Let's find out if I'm right, and then over the course of the rehearsals, often enough, working 15 minutes worth of dialogue will tell me something about, oh, I need to change everything I thought about this scene in act two. So we have to go back and rework that now because we just discovered this. So it is a constant process, a constant re-evaluation process.

Frederick: I know you mentioned West Side Story earlier and I know that there is a new production out that I think imagines and envisions the production in significantly different ways than the original one. So help us answer a question. For those of us who are lay folks, who are on the outside, give us one thing that can help us to enjoy a production better, or maybe put another way, what is it that's going on that most people in the audience, whether it's 200 or 2000, don't really understand about the process but would help them to enjoy the production more, if they did?

Thomas: Enjoy is an interesting word here. I think maybe appreciate is a word I would choose because I think we want to be able to have the theatre we make, what the audience comes to see and hear, have an effect regardless of whether they know anything about the history or not and that's the most basic level. If you know more about what goes into it, maybe you have a better appreciation for how much work goes into it, and you feel more compassion for an actor who is working that hard or you can appreciate the ability it takes to do some of the moves or sing some of the notes, or whatever, but I think that's a secondary level. I am really interested in the

production of Westside that you just mentioned. It opened just last night, or two nights ago, and so I've been reading coverage about it and it is radically different. And that is a curious thing about what the function of art is and how much are we allowed to change it? And there's vast treatises on how much a director is actually the author of any particular production of a particular work. The things I've have read about this West Side production scare me a little bit, actually, because to me it's changing the play that as it exists more than I feel comfortable with. And I think the authors, in this case Mr. Bernstein, Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Laurents, and because Jerome Robbins is co-creator of the piece and had the initial idea and created the initial production, those four people had an idea of what the play was going to be and then they made the play be that as best they could. With permission, the new director, Ivo van Hove, has radically interpreted what it means to be doing this play. I find that really interesting but also kind of dangerous. I can't speak to the quality of the production because obviously I haven't seen it but my position is always, okay, but if you wanted to say different thing, why didn't you find a play that said that? I'm talking a lot. Did I answer your question?

Frederick: Yes you did. Absolutely. Katie, from a performer's perspective, what would you want audience members to appreciate or enjoy about what they are seeing?

DeFiglio: Yes, I think one of the important things is that in live theatre, that it is live. There are people up there. It's not just watching a movie where you know...

Frederick: It's been edited a million times.

DeFiglio: Yeah. It is live so it is different every night and the audience has a certain energy too, so it's not quite as passive as people may think. We can feel that on stage. Even all the actors are bringing something different each day. So you have to really be present, but I think as an audience member, also, knowing that you can react, you know, we love that. Laugh when it is funny, you know, it's a live performance. So very different than what we might be used to or just sitting at a computer so the audience can give to the performers just as the performers are giving back.

Robin Cummings: This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening. Now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

Frederick: You are listening to 30 Brave Minutes, a broadcast service of the College of Arts and Sciences at UNC Pembroke. I'm Jeff Frederick and our panel is Nathan Thomas and Katie

DeFiglio: We are talking about musical theater. So what are three Productions that everybody ought to see?

Thomas: See, I thought about that too. You were kind enough to send us these questions in advance and so I've been thinking about it. Do I believe there are such things? I have my favorites. West Side Story is my favorite show ever. This is one of the reasons that I am resistant to...

Frederick: Can you snap those fingers?

Thomas: No, no, no. I'm not one of those performers, and I've played it literally one time, but I've never actually done a production of it, which is to my detriment, but that's not to say that that will be the thing for everybody. I think that there are three things for everybody and what you said about Jerome Robbins in your introduction about this is the kind of conversation that you have over wine, or whatever. I've been in those conversations, when overseas with Mary Rogers. Okay, make your ten best list. That was a bunch of years ago and now it has to be, okay, what are your 20 favorite musicals, right? Because trying to choose even 20 is really hard, so saying three is impossible. West Side is still at the top of my list and then, everything will be different for everybody. Next To Normal that you mentioned, I've been lucky enough to do a couple of times and it had a big effect on me when I saw it. It spoke to me. It was really well done. It won't be for everybody. It's a particular kind of music that fits my generation and I think there's a generation that is more attracted to In The Heights and Hamilton than I am just on a musical level. I think it's a great achievement but it's not the music I go home and listen to at night. Jelly's Last Jam is the music I go home and listen to at night and think oh this is great. It speaks to me. I have no idea how it is as a show because I didn't get to see it, but I would have loved to see it because it had Gregory Hines in it, and he was fabulous. Three? Can you do three?

DeFiglio: No. I feel like maybe if the question is what three today because it could really change and I know a lot of times maybe one that I just saw recently. I just saw Come From Away on Broadway and it was just incredible. Not only the music. The story of just people coming together at this... For those that don't know in Newfoundland all the planes that had to land and they all ended up in this tiny town and it's how all the people come together as they're waiting to get back home

Thomas: Planes diverted on 9/11.

DeFiglio: Yes what's incredible, too is all the actors are playing multiple parts just seamlessly. And it's not an elaborate set. Passengers on the bus and that, you know, the chairs are just all in line and so seeing that, the acting and it just seamless, is great and just a great story, too. I also Rent is one of my absolute favorite shows. I've seen that multiple times on Broadway. That's one of the few shows. I just saw the tour of the revival and I just think I'm really big on the ones

you can come away from and the message is just, like *Rent*, just living each day and no day but today. And the first time I saw that I just I didn't even know what to do with myself after. It was just like, how can I top this. I don't even know where to go eat. Again, if we are talking the top three musicals today, I think, one is *The Color Purple*, also, was just transformative watching that. We are lucky enough to have the tour coming through here very soon, so everybody please go see it, because it is an incredible show. Again, just redemption and getting through adversity and strength.

Frederick: It's a great book, a great movie, and I'm sure a great musical. So tell us a funny story from one of the productions you have been a part of.

Thomas: Well, all the funny stories I have been able to think of, they all involve mistakes, something that has gone wrong. I did a production of Monty Python's *Spamalot* in Las Vegas and John O'Hurley was our King Arthur. You might know John O'Hurley from *Seinfeld*.

Frederick: He's got my hair.

Thomas: Or you have his.

Frederick: There you go.

Thomas: There is a moment in *Spamalot* when Lady of the Lake rises on an elevator in the stage floor. Or, I should say, is supposed to come up an elevator from the stage floor, because on one particular occasion the elevator would not work. It had decided it was taking the day off. So John was kind of stuck out there and the show had to stop because there was literally no way to just okay, we're going to just vamp our way through this. And so he stopped the show. He came down and started talking to the audience and he said well, let me explain to you what's supposed to happen at this moment. The elevator would normally come up and Reva Rice would be standing on it singing her guts out and it would be glorious, but today the elevator, much like my soul, is stuck on the bottom. He proceeded to tell stories for about twenty minutes about filming *Seinfeld* and then they fixed whatever the technical malfunction was and we moved on with the show. But it was a strange moment to be in the pit.

Frederick: Everybody in that theatre will probably remember that for the rest of their lives.

Thomas: There is no question.

DeFiglio: I think the same thing. Things going wrong. You never know when a costume piece or a set piece... I was doing *Company* and it was the opening number and singing and dancing and one of the set pieces halfway through is supposed to fly up and I think they had added something to it. It was swinging just slightly again. I didn't even know what was happening and one of the fixtures I think hit something else. So all of a sudden, you know, we are singing and dancing and you hear the shatter of glass all over and we just kept going. That's the thing. It's live theatre. You never know what's going to happen and we just had a really tight cast so we just trusted each other and just kept going. We did not know what was happening and just kept

going. The next scene they had to sweep the stage and stuff, but its keep going because anything can happen, but usually its things that are not so funny at the time, but later you can tell stories about and laugh about.

Frederick: Those are two great stories. Let's flip the script a little bit. What's a production that's widely hailed or always eagerly anticipated but maybe because of the interpretation or it just doesn't fit with you for one reason. What's one that has never really been meaningful to you?

Thomas: I won't say it's not been meaningful to me. I haven't seen as much recently in New York as I would like, but last time I was there I went and saw Dear Evan Hansen. I like everything it's trying to do but I think that the approach to the physical production of it kind of got in the way of the storytelling for me and it's a huge hit and I'm happy for them all, but not my thing.

DeFiglio: Yeah, especially it's such a heavy, just the subject matter, I remember seeing it and it was great, but it really stuck with me for many days, which I guess is a good thing. I try to be open to everything. One musical I haven't seen it that much, but Evita. I just I know people love it, but I've never really connected to it in the music.

Thomas: I should read you one of the things in the most recent musical theatre history book that I was teaching from about it, because one of the reviews of the time was talking about how Hal Prince directed the initial production of Evita and the comment was about how he had dressed it up so well that you didn't kind of notice it was the Emperor with No Clothes. It was really, really wonderful to watch and then you came away from it going, but wait. (laughter)

DeFiglio: What?

Thomas: I've seen the movie but I haven't seen it live.

Frederick: Last question. Let's pull back with a bigger lens. Talk about the arts and why they are so important, and why they are so meaningful for us as a society.

DeFiglio: How much time do we have? I mean, it's so important. We are so wrapped in technology and just being in front of a computer that the discipline to be in a show or to study something and do something creative, exploring, trusting yourself. Also working with other people to build something. There is nothing like that. It's like your family for however many months that the production is. It's just such an experience of just working with people and creating something. It's just hard to explain, but it's one of the most wonderful things, and you know when I'm teaching voice and theatre, I'm just wow, this piece of music is so incredible. I am so lucky to do this and it's just for many reasons, incredibly important to hold on to it and promote it.

Thomas: I agree absolutely with all of that, and I think that's the kind of perspective from within. From an audience's perspective what we are hoping to create is a reminder that we are all human and what it means to be human, whether that is through musical theatre or whether

that is any other kind of art. We are trying to illuminate the things that make us the same instead of delineate the things that make us different and I think that is more and more important all the time.

Frederick: I was in our art gallery here on campus earlier today and I think the same things that both of you just said could be said about the experience there, trying to be human and trying to understand each other, finding meaning, finding ways to create and to explore and all of the good that comes out of that. Katie and Nathan, thank you for being here with us and for a really fun discussion of musical theater. Now, let's all go see a show!

Thomas and DeFiglio: Thank you!

Frederick: Join us again next time for another edition of 30 Brave Minutes.

Richard Gay: Today's podcast was edited by Richard Gay and transcribed by Janet Gentes.

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Good job everybody.