

MAKING MUSIC FOR NON-MUSICAL PLAYS: A DELICATE BALANCE

By Joanne Wallace

Shaw once noted that “hell is full of musical amateurs”, but the Shaw Festival is full of pros. Among them shine three bright young composers who’ve written music for four of this season’s biggest hits. Here **John Gzowski**, **Wayne Gwillim** and **Zachary Florence** share their secrets to composing music for non-musical plays.

IT’S ONE OF THE SADDEST MOMENTS in American theatre. Lola Delaney, tragic heroine of William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba*, sits alone on stage, telephone in hand, begging her mother for help. Before our eyes Lola’s hope crumbles, as she realizes she is utterly alone.

For composer Zachary Florence, this scene presented a unique challenge. Charged with writing original music to accompany Inge’s poignant drama, Zachary knew this moment needed underscoring. But he had to make sure the music didn’t get in the way of anything else.

“Corrine Koslo [playing Lola] is a fantastic actor and doesn’t need help from me to convey any of that. But there’s this big period of silence on the stage, so we had to create something.”

It took Zachary about 10 re-writes, but he finally pared the underscoring down until it was just right – enough to support both the actor and the moment, but without telling the audience what to think or feel.

THE JOB OF MUSIC IN NON-MUSICAL THEATRE

Composing music for the theatre is filled with these sorts of challenges, and a host of practical considerations as well. So where do you start? All three composers say the process begins with a thorough understanding of the job of incidental music in a non-musical play.

In a traditional “book” musical, the music drives the entire action. Here the music is more about setting the tone, bringing the audience into the time and place of the play, and helping support the action while the text and the actors tell the story.

Wayne Gwillim, composer for Terence Rattigan’s romantic comedy *French Without Tears*, knew right away his score had to say “France,” “fun,” and “late-1930s.” Lucky for him, Rattigan’s script contained the inspiration for Wayne’s entire score: a German folk-song called *Die Lorelie*, which one of the characters hums and whistles throughout the action.

Opposite page: Corrine Koslo as tragic heroine Lola Delaney in Come Back, Little Sheba.

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“The show is set in 1930s France, when all the kids were listening to American swing and jazz – not traditional French music from the past. So when I found *Die Lorelei* in the script, I thought: wouldn’t it be fun to take this little tune, and make it into a swing number?”

NAILING TIME AND PLACE FOR MISALLIANCE AND HIS GIRL FRIDAY

John Gzowski, who’s composed music for both Shaw’s *Misalliance* and John Guare’s *His Girl Friday*, also had to convey time and place to his audience through music. Director Eda Holmes has set *Misalliance* in the late 1960s, so John needed music that sounded distinctly ‘60s – but wasn’t anything recognizably from the time.

“This is one of the challenges of using music to paint historical settings. If you use real music from the era, it just makes the play sound dated,” says John. He faced a similar issue with *His Girl Friday*, which takes place in 1939 Chicago. His solution to both was to write new music inspired by the popular music of the time. So *Misalliance* has an Austin Powers sort of “groove” behind it, while *His Girl*’s score leans heavily on smoky saxophones.

REHEARSAL WELL UNDERWAY BEFORE WRITING BEGINS

For all three composers, the research phase includes plenty of consultation with the director, study of the script, and listening to time-specific music. Some shows also require historical research. *Come Back, Little Sheba*, for instance, includes an on-stage radio, so Zachary had to find the right archival recordings to do the job specified in the script.

Budget also has to be considered. An elaborate score for a full-piece orchestra won’t work if your budget only covers five musicians. So before the actual writing starts, each composer has to figure out how many musicians and which instruments he has to work with.

Even then, most composers don’t start writing until well into the rehearsal process. This is because music for non-musical plays occurs most predictably in two spots: at the “tops and tails” (beginnings and ends) of scenes and acts, and during scene changes. Since most of this develops in rehearsal, the composer can’t

start writing until that process is well underway. Spots ripe for underscoring – such as Lola’s heartbreaking phone call – are usually discovered in rehearsal as well.

COMPOSERS TAKE LAST-MINUTE CHANGES IN STRIDE

There are two distinct phases in the rehearsal process: an early one in a rehearsal hall, and another once the show moves onto the actual stage. It’s common for timing to change with this move – for instance, a scene change that took 30 seconds in rehearsal might end up taking 60 seconds on stage. “For a composer, 30 seconds is massive,” says Wayne.

All of these last-minute changes are one reason theatre composers leave the recording of their music as late as possible. And, although The Shaw has an on-site recording studio, this is where technology can be a composer’s best friend. John Gzowski recorded the entire *His Girl Friday* score on his laptop. He biked – laptop in tow – from one musician’s house to the next, recording each separately and mixing the final tracks himself. “These days my laptop is more powerful than any studio from 20 years ago. It really helps with flexibility – we can leave the recording as late as possible, plus we have the ability to adjust each instrument separately, even after recording,” says John.

MUSICAL MAGIC?

All three agree that music needs to be handled carefully, because of its tremendous power to move an audience. “If the music comes in and it’s wrong – it will rip the audience right out of the moment,” says Zachary. “Either that or it will overshadow the actor’s work – and that’s not right either.”

So when you’re in the theatre, laughing with the rowdy boys in *French Without Tears*, dodging bullets in *His Girl Friday*, or holding your breath while Lola Delaney breaks your heart – take a moment to listen to the music.

You may not have noticed, but thanks to the hard work of these talented young composers, you know exactly when and where you are, and – before you know it – you’re helplessly lost in the story.

But that’s why you came, right?

ONLINE

- > *French Without Tears* die Lorelei swing theme ▶▶
- > *Misalliance* “groove” theme ▶▶
- > *His Girl Friday* “smoky saxophone” theme ▶▶
- > *Come Back, Little Sheba*, underscoring from Lola/telephone scene ▶▶