

# *Songs for a New World*

## Director's Note

*Songs for a New World* premiered off-Broadway at the WPA theater in 1995. The first full musical by a young Jason Robert Brown, this song cycle introduced the world to the award-winning composer's incomparable musical gifts personified in his soaring melodies, complex harmonies, and emotional melodic journeys. Far from being the apotheosis of his career, the young composer proved this song cycle was, rather, the springboard to a vast array of successful musicals including *Parade*, *The Last Five Years*, *13* and *The Bridges of Madison County*.

A song cycle is an episodic musical performance based on a theme, where each song tells its own story, but there is no single linear narrative. While certainly not the first song cycle, it was one of the earlier versions of the contemporary musical era, that set off a chain of new song cycles in musical theatre, inspiring such future works as *Elegies*, *Edges* and *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*, the latter being produced by the department in the spring of 2020.

What makes song cycles like this engaging is their exceptional ability to weave a mix of stories together around a central theme. In this case, that theme is "the moment of decision". According to Brown, "It's about one moment. It's about hitting the wall and having to make a choice, or take a stand, or turn around and go back."

I was first introduced to this show as a freshman in college. I had never heard anything like it before and all my friends were obsessed with the music. After listening and buying the CD (yes, yes....a compact disc....what a world), I was hooked as well. The first directing job I ever had was a cabaret of modern musical songs, and we performed 3 numbers from the show in that performance.

What stands out to me about this song cycle is its study in contrasts. The vignettes offer both contrasts in musical styles as well as contrasts among the characters, all of whom are dealing with major decision points in their lives. We have younger people, older people, romances, parents, people starting their lives together and even people nearing the end of their lives. But they all face a crucible in their journeys and each song gives the audience a window into their ordeal. They are all confronted with a choice. Do they go on? Do they turn around and go back? Do they let the moment pass? Or do they push through into the unknown and take a chance?

In each of these songs, Jason Robert Brown explores a unique question or situation featuring a character in some position that should be relatable to at least a portion of the audience. That's what makes this work so evergreen nearly 30 years after its premiere. The great belletrists of history - James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, Fran Lebowitz - have had a unique ability to capture moments in time and explore human emotion in a way that seemed to simultaneously

target the pulse of the zeitgeist while also examining questions that are timeless. Even playwrights like Orwell, Miller and Gorky wrote many essays exploring the human experience. In a way, this is Brown's contribution to that exploration.

This show has so much to say. It doesn't try to carve out a moral position or express a message or point of view. Rather, it tries to open a window into the human experience. It reveals people who are struggling with a range of major decisions, perhaps decisions that others in the audience have had experience with themselves. In the songs, some people move forward and tackle their moment head on, while others step away, or seek out a third option to avoid their decision. The characters run the gamut from exceedingly happy, to desperate, to angry, to broken and sad. Together the stories explore a broad cross section of the human condition. And while the more polemical amongst us may doubt that theatre can inspire, I would be shocked if at least one of these numbers did not engender some sort of emotional catharsis in everyone in the audience tonight.

As always, any production of this magnitude is supported by a staggering number of people. I'm so thankful to the designers and crew for their hard work. I'm thankful to the stage management team, the production team, and the department for their hours of dedication to this project. But, I'm especially thankful for this wonderful cast. This show, more than any other I have directed in my time at UNH was a collaborative effort, with each number lending itself to the group's creativity. Nearly rising to the level of a devised piece, each one of these songs is fairly open ended, allowing the actors and director the freedom to tell the story the way they see fit, or to create their own story in the song, as long as it supports the lyrics and language of the score. So much of the blocking, story, choreography, and vocal performance you will hear tonight is totally inspired by the acting work of these performers. I may have had a concept or idea for each number, but watching these performers in rehearsal and unpacking the text with each of them enabled me to adapt, change or grow these ideas into the work you see in front of you today. No other group of people could have created this unique performance, and I'm blessed to have had the opportunity to get to work with them on this production.

I hope you all enjoy the University of New Hampshire Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *Songs for a New World*.