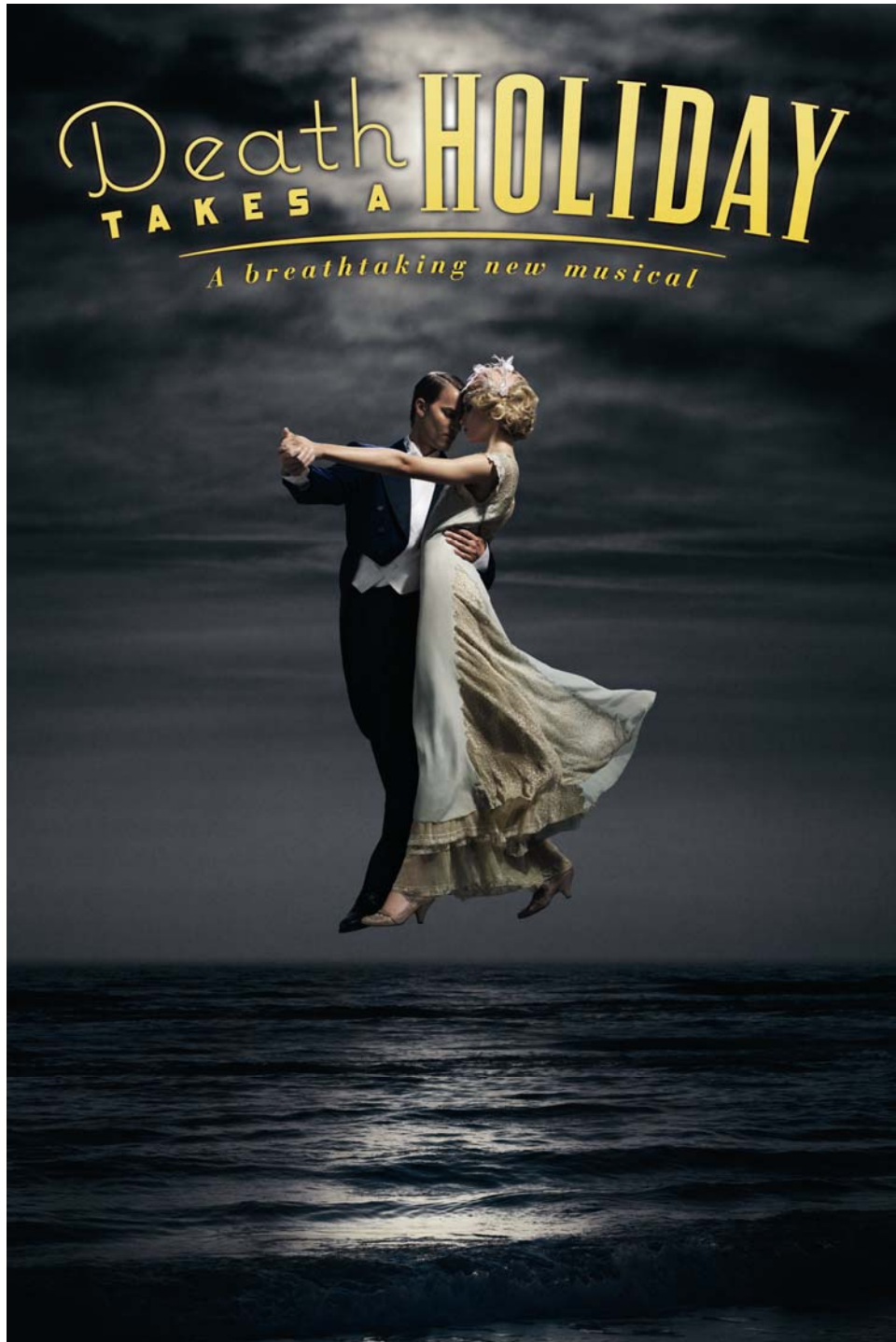


# *UPSTAGE*



# ***Interview with the Composer & Lyricist***

## **Maury Yeston**

Composer and Lyricist Maury Yeston completed an interview with Education Dramaturg Ted Sod and shared his thoughts on the writing process and inspiration for *Death Takes a Holiday*.

**TED SOD: When did you realize you wanted to write for the musical theatre? Where were you educated?**

**MAURY YESTON:** I knew I wanted to write musicals soon after seeing the original production of *My Fair Lady* as a pre-teen. Everything about that production – its intelligence, its literacy, humor, enormous heart and wit, melodic genius – it all made me want to grow up and reach for that bar. My elementary education was at a Jewish parochial school, while studying classical and then jazz piano from the age of six. That was followed by a small private high school with intensive focus on the arts, a Yale Undergraduate degree, two post-graduate years in England at Cambridge, a Yale MA and PhD in Music Theory. Then came 10 years in the Lehman Engel BMI musical theater workshop (which I eventually taught), and I think I am probably still learning something new every day.

**TED SOD: What inspired you to musicalize *Death Takes a Holiday* by Alberto Casella? What do you feel the musical is about? Does the material have personal resonance for you and, if so, how?**

**MAURY YESTON:** Peter Stone and I had just garnered five Tony Awards® for *Titanic* – which was a massive musical with more than 30 in the cast and 26 in the orchestra. We both wanted to turn to something smaller – a chamber musical with fewer than 15 in the cast and a small orchestral ensemble. We were drawn to the Cassella play because its subject matter was so compelling, so universal, and (especially) so timeless. With that play written in Europe in 1928, successfully mounted on Broadway in 1929, a brilliant movie version in 1934, played by schools and theatrical groups for 75 years, remade as *Meet Joe Black*, it was clear that this subject matter and deeply moving story would never go out of fashion and would always be relevant and potent. A love story that celebrates the joy, the light, the humor, and the miracle of life and love – lived to the fullest! What an opportunity to write something from the heart that could connect universally to all audiences! And it seemed to me that the piece screamed to be sung.

**TED SOD: How did you decide what the score for *Death Takes a Holiday* would sound like? What kind of research did you have to do in order to write it?**

**MAURY YESTON:** As with everything I've written, I knew the piece would sound like my own music—contemporary, but carrying within it the style and elements of all

who come before me. Because it is set in Northern Italy during the Roaring 20's, I also knew that there would be opportunities to summon up early jazz, the Shimmy, and other aspects of the period as accent-colors of the score, but in essence, every aspect of the piece provides opportunities for creating soaring melody, dance, comedy, pathos and romance – and to achieve a modern sensibility within the Period flavor of the score. The research for the piece was already provided by my having worked and lived a bit in Northern Italy and my familiarity with the locale of the Lombard lakes, and also by my experience as a musicologist with my love of the music of the period.

**TED SOD: What was the most challenging part of adapting *Death Takes A Holiday* into a musical? What part was the most fun?**

**MAURY YESTON:** The most challenging and most fun in adapting the original play was, as ever, seeking and finding solutions to honor it and at the same time alter it so as to conform to the particular exigencies of our musical theater tradition. One must become a musical dramatist – fashioning the songs to tell the story, define the characters, lighten our hearts, and move us to tears. Such a challenge requires years of your life to meet, and in fact it has taken years to get to the point where we are now. With all that said, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

**TED SOD: Can you describe what you look for in a director? In casting actors?**

**MAURY YESTON:** Same answer to both questions. I look to the Director and the Actors to tell me what I don't know about my own work – to push me to be my best, and to inspire me. As for the actors, in particular, they are the true geniuses on whom I rely. Without them my lyrics are mere words in a script, my music mere dots on a page. It is the actors who breathe life into my scribblings and quicken the hearts of the audience.

**TED SOD: Who are your favorite composers/lyricists? Who or what inspires you as an artist?**

**MAURY YESTON:** Beethoven was the first. I always knew Mozart was a genius beyond comprehension – his music, like a leaf or a flower, an ineffable miracle I could never hope to duplicate. Bach too was a superhuman whose music is a technical edifice beyond understanding. But, even as a child, I felt within Beethoven's music, the composer's own struggle to will his music into existence – for me it is the ultimate result of what a human being could achieve with obsession, persistence and infinite passion. Beethoven, Gershwin, Berlin, Loesser, Louis Armstrong, Debussy – they all became my models and inspirations, examples of what one could reasonably spend a lifetime reaching for.

**TED SOD: What advice would you give to a young person who wants to write for the musical theatre? (Maury has written an article entitled "Advice to Young Theater Composers", an excerpt is below)**

**MAURY YESTON:** I know what is in your head. I was there. Here's some well-intentioned advice.

1) Write. Write it down. And work on it. When I entered Freshman year of college, I told the head of the music department I wanted to be a composer. He said "Write music. Guaranteed, if you do, you'll be a composer."

I don't mean to be glib, but that's the everything of it. The art of writing cannot really be taught, but it can be learned – by writing. All the interviews you will do later in life when you are successful and famous – all the questions about how you write, your process of generating music, the interaction with words – those questions are based on a false premise. You don't write because you want to, or try to, or make yourself do it. Writing is not something you do. It's something you are. Musical ideas occur to you in your head. You think in music. It is an involuntary impulse. But, simply put, will you write it down? Work on it? Learn from it? Attach it to words? Give it a dramatic context? Study harmony? Counterpoint? Analysis? History? Learn the craft? Will you be so ambitious, or compulsive (or well-balanced), that you can overcome the personal embarrassment of showing your work to the world? That's up to you.

2) Study. Please. If you only know three chords, you will write three-chord music. Beethoven studied. In his student textbook, he read a section called "How To Write a New Sonata". It said "Take a sonata. Take the Bass, write a new upper part. Take your new upper part, write a new Bass." Remember where Bebop came from? Brand new genius upper lines – superimposed over the chord changes to "How High The Moon". The past will teach you. Learn from it.

In addition to harmony, I recommend studying counterpoint. Why? Because you are writing music for the voice, to be sung in a theatrical work, and that means melody. And a melody is a sequence of tones – perceived as an entity. You don't perceive the whole until it comes to an end, whereupon you retroactively understand and evaluate what you have already heard coming before. And it all connects – in time. All good melodic lines share similar characteristics of well-formedness. They are propulsive, elastic, have a shape, a sense of climax, and a tension that resolves to a feeling of completion at the end. Species counterpoint is a laboratory wherein you can teach yourself, through experience, how to make such lines. So many attempts at melody are really successions of notes that sit on the tops of changing chords that your fingers find (for you piano-writers). But these are not melodies. They are the desire to write melodies. Sing your melodies, independent of accompaniment. The best ones carry within them their own harmonic structure, and sense of wholeness and intelligibility. Examples? "Always", the Beatles' "Yesterday", "La Vie En Rose", "La Ci Darem La Mano", "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin", "Happy Birthday", "I've Been Workin' On The Railroad". Hum them. You'll see. Now hum yours. Does it do that?.

3) Listen. To everything. And everyone. Don't worry about your personal style. You are already you. Nadia Boulanger is reputed to have advised her students: "Never avoid the obvious". What is obvious to you may well be non-obvious to the rest of the world. What you hear will influence you, and you will filter it through your personal impulses. Don't try to be different. In the end, trying to make yourself interesting only makes you less so. And open yourself up to sensing reactions to your work, and evaluate accordingly. Your first idea is not necessarily the best one.

4) Rewrite. The art of writing is the art of rewriting. All the fruits of your study will come into play when you get down to work. First... write. Get it down. Anything. Then you can get to work and make it better. How? See paragraph 2 above.

5) Learn to set words. Words first. That's the way it started. The Florentines found out, in the 1590's, that the Ancient Greeks had sung their tragedies – and so they applied their fortuitously expressive new Italian musical style to the theater, and created opera. You are doing the same. Learning to set words will help you avoid having to wedge ideas and phrases into a predetermined tune that you are married to. Of course, lightning will sometimes strike, and you will come up with a marvelous, lucky, and dramatically apt melody that a lyricist can adorn with words. But, be open to finding the premise of the song first, and that means words, because you are musicalizing a story. We are singing onstage in a form of impassioned speech because we are too filled with emotion to do otherwise. Frank Loesser, who always wrote lyrics before music, said that songs often happen in musicals where exclamations happen in language. Some songs even begin with an exclamation: "Oh! What a beautiful mornin'! "; "Why can't you behave?"; "Embrace me..."; "Mammy!!!" (well, you get the idea).

6) Develop a musical metaphor. A musical theater song is often underlined with a specific accompaniment figure, or vamp, that will capture the essence and content of the theatrical intention that is meant to be acted – a musical metaphor of the lyric. The theory behind this notion is quite old. Descartes, in 1649, laid the groundwork in a little-known treatise entitled "Les Passions de l'Ame" (The Passions of the Soul). Though an idealist, he needed to find a way of connecting the physical world to the immaterial world of ideas, and so he implied an answer to the question: How does music (external physical world) affect our emotions (internal mental states)? In his theory he suggested that emotions are generated within us by "animal spirits" (esprits animaux) and that, by implication, the specific motion of a musical figure may resonate with these "spirits" to create an equivalent and corresponding Emotion in our souls. Not great science, but that kind of thinking supported an entire era of Baroque musical affect through figuration, from Rameau through Bach and beyond. Modern examples? Schubert's "Erlkonig", Sondheim's opening vamp to "Sweeney Todd", my own "Simple" or "Be On Your Own". The accompaniment provides, in each case, an indelible musical image that defines atmosphere, emotion, and point of view.

7) Have patience. Lehman Engel used to say "cream rises to the top". Good work exerts its own pressure to be heard. Do your work. Make it good. There is

always room for it. Believe me; no one has ever complained that there is too much good music in the world. We are all waiting to hear yours.

**TED SOD: What future projects are you working on?**

**MAURY YESTON:** I am completing what is apparently the first three-act full length American Ballet that is based on an American literary masterpiece: *Tom Sawyer – A Ballet in Three Acts*. It is scheduled to premiere at the opening of the new Kaufman Center for The Performing Arts this October in Kansas City MO.

# *Interview with the Actor*

## **Julian Ovenden**

**TED SOD: How did you come to work in the theatre?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** It's quite a difficult thing to trace back; your motivation. I wasn't one of these people who came out of the womb and realized the stage was for them. I think it occurred as a natural progression in my life as a result of the events that fashioned me. My father, for example, is a priest and a man of the people. He is a great communicator. That might be one of the influences. Then I went away to school when I was seven as a chorister in a choir which was musically and artistically a professional environment. That set me up in that way. It opened a window into that world. In England, if you go away to boarding school at a young age, you could find yourself emotionally stunted. You have to deal with the trauma of leaving your parents. People talk about the English "stiff upper lip" and being reserved. When I was 16, 17, 18, 19 and growing up, I perhaps wasn't as in touch with my emotional life as I wanted to be or needed to be. I think it was a natural progression to find something that allowed me to reconnect with that part of my life; whether it was through music which I was passionate about or whether it was through acting. I found myself going to drama school and I felt at home with it. I felt I had something to give, something to offer and something to share. Those are the main sign posts on that particular map. I discovered that it is a job that I deeply love.

**TED SOD: Tell me about the choristers.**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** You go through the basics of a normal education in London. But at the beginning of the day you would spend an hour doing music and rehearsing. For an hour in the evening you would sing at St. Paul's Cathedral. You are working with professional musicians and you become a professional musician. You learn routine, the rigor and the nuts and bolts of what it takes to be a professional performing everyday. There would be recordings and tours. The first time I came to America, we toured around for a month. It was an amazing experience. You learn about musicianship and what it takes to be a good musician. It gives you the opportunity to see if it is something for you later on in life. I knew what it took to be a professional. Whether I wanted to do it, I wasn't sure at that stage. But I knew that it took a lot of skill and a lot of work to be at the top of your game. Not to be negative about the business we are now in, and it sounds pompous to say this, but I think because of the way the business has changed, the attention to the craft, whether it be an artist, dancer, musician or whatever, has been marginalized. It has become about media and how famous you can become. I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to learn from people who spent 40 or 50 years perfecting their craft.

**TED SOD: What intrigued you about Death Takes a Holiday? Had you seen the Frederic March Film?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** No. I knew the movie incarnation with Brad Pitt and Anthony Hopkins, Meet Joe Black. It intrigued me because I like the idea of it. The modern movie is kind of a guilty pleasure Saturday night movie, isn't it? It's like it's a bit slushy and sentimental but it's quite good in a way—well acted. The story's good. It's romantic and I like romantic things. I like pieces that take a big bite out of something. And I like the fact that you couldn't put your finger on the tone of the piece. That it screws around with important fundamental topics with a kind of light brush stroke. I've worked with Maury Yeston before and I'm a big fan of his music. He was the first to call me up and alert me to the project. The process began from there; meeting the director Doug Hughes and going through that sort of thing. We haven't really started yet but Doug seems like a great person to work with. It's a good role.

**TED SOD: The idea of playing Death must have intrigued you -- yes?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** Absolutely. I've been sent things for T.V. auditions like a hot shot lawyer or a police man. There are basically five roles and you just pick one. In the theater, I like things that are "heart on their sleeve" kind of material. I like big emotional stuff. The role of Death seemed like a huge challenge. I am eager to do it and see what happens. It's also great to be back in New York. I love New York.

**TED SOD: You were here in Butley with Nathan Lane.**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** I was and I did a TV show here as well, Cashmere Mafia.

**TED SOD: I'm very curious how you go about preparing for a new musical? What's your process?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** A lot of actors have a very hard and fast way of preparing for things. I'm more interested in taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that; more of a "buffet man" as it were. For new musicals in general, I think it's a mistake to go in the room thinking you have everything sorted. It's a process of rewriting and collaboration as much with the actors as with the writers. It's a chemical reaction. You have to be prepared a little bit and see what happens. Of course I've done a bit of research, read the plays, seen the films, thought about it and had quite a bit of discussions with Doug Hughes and Maury Yeston on the telephone. I've prepared the music. I think that part of it isn't going to change so much but I think the evolution of the piece in general has a way to go; especially when we get it on its feet. I think I try to keep as open a mind as possible. As an actor, in general you are terrified. You start from a place of fear. I spent most of my career fearing I had to be good. With fear, you are closed creatively. God forbid you do something that makes you look like an idiot. In television, you have to give a performance straight away. Onstage you have the liberty, if you are working with a nice team of people, to fall on your face and make an idiot of yourself.



Hopefully, I'll get the opportunity to do that over the next five weeks and then morph into a genius performance.

**TED SOD: What do you think the musical is about? Is it important when you sign on to a show that it means something to you?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** Yes. In a show like this, it is absolutely vital. If we were doing a farce, it would be a slightly different thing because it would be about making people laugh. This piece deals with fundamental issues in life and tries to do it with a light touch so that in the end the audience feels that these subjects creep up on them without them knowing. At the end of the evening or four-fifths of the way through the show, they are made to think and not just be entertained by a rather sweet story. In the scenes themselves, I think it is about how we value life and what is important in life even though "death" is in the title. It is really about what it means to be alive and what it means to love someone and how that changes or doesn't change when that person dies. In a way, it is a textbook on how to live your life, what is important, being grateful to the people who love you and the people you love.

**TED SOD: What do you make of the idea that the character of Death wants to know more about humans?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** I have a young son who is 18 months old. In a way, his experience in life has been a character study in how to play this part. You come from no knowledge whatsoever and bit by bit you take on things. You take on fears.

**TED SOD: Do you get the sense that Death falls instantly in love with Grazia -- that she is somehow the catalyst for him materializing?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** The way I see it, he starts from a place of curiosity and weariness. Imagine you have to do the same job day after day for 30,000 years. Death wants to see the other side of the story. He comes across someone whose spirit is so life affirming; pure and beautiful. Grazia opens the door and makes him cross over the threshold to make a journey. He falls in love. He has a lifetime of emotions compressed into two and a half days. It is definitely her who gives him a sense of humanity, sense of conscience and an emotional life. Through Grazia, Death understands what it is to be alive, what it is to die and what you leave behind.

**TED SOD: Do you think she goes with him in the end? It seems mysterious to me. In the film version, it is very clear.**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** I think she does because she has died in the car. He suspends time in a way. If we were to make the film version of this musical, the car would crash, she would be somersaulted out of the car and if James Cameron were directing this in 3D, she would be suspended over the car on the side of the road. It's like stretching time. It is a "what if". He gives her the opportunity to stay. He

says, “Listen, for you, I’m going to bend the rules this one time. I’ve seen the way you are. Your parents have lost a child already and they would be destroyed if you were to die as well, so you should stay.” And she says, “No. I want to go because love is stronger than death.” In a very light way, that is the message. We’re not getting out a drum and beating this thing. In a small way, you think about people in your life who are no longer there and that is a comforting thought because they still exist in you.

**TED SOD: Do you have any personal experience with Death?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** Both of my parents are alive and except from my grandparents who have died, none of my friends or family has died prematurely. In my early life, I wasn’t really exposed to death and to the cruelty of life. But I have seen it while singing in the choir for funerals. When my father was in London, we used to do a father and son funeral team. He used to tape the service and I would play the organ. He got paid 20 pounds and I got 25 pounds. Memorial services are a little different because it is more of a celebration than a grieving. It is interesting how different religious cultures view it. We tend to forget and pretend death doesn’t exist; in denial. It’s a part of life and the natural way things go.

**TED SOD: Who or what inspires you?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** That’s a good question. Brilliance of mind inspires. The writing of Aaron Sorkin for example on *The West Wing* or the vocal genius of opera singer Bryn Terfel, or the dancing of a ballerina or a jazz musician; someone with technical brilliance inspires me. When it is harnessed with humanity and a sense of life—that is what really inspires me. Even when it is not, someone who is full of acceptance, tolerance, generosity is quite an inspiring thing. It’s both the flashy and non-flashy side. I like things that have form and feeling balanced. Most great art boils down to a balance between form and feeling. I also like great communicators. Michael Morpurgo, the author of *War Horse*, gave a speech a couple months ago about how children are being educated in different parts of the world including Palestine and Africa. His speech was so inspiring because it came from a deep place of humanity and love for children. He spoke for about 45 minutes extemporaneously without notes and it was amazing. He is connected to things that are important. I think that’s one of the reasons I like doing this. It’s got some nice flashy and brilliant things about it but it also has a connection to something relevant and important.

**TED SOD: I was wondering if you have any advice for young people who want to do what you do?**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** When I started thinking about becoming an actor, I went to a friend of my father’s who was teaching at drama school. I said, “I’m thinking about becoming an actor, can you give me any advice? How does it work?” He said, “Forget it. Don’t do it.” It was then that I realized that this is exactly what I wanted to do. The reason I tell that story is because I think you have to be bloody-minded to do it because it is hard. It is hard in many ways. It is hard emotionally if you are in a relationship because of the sacrifices you have to

make. It is not about being famous. I think perseverance, hard work and a love for it is important. You have to trust that you are doing something right. I love collaborating, working with people who have the same interests. I'm not particularly religious even though my father is a priest but art is my religion. That is how I think of it. This is my church.

**TED SOD: And you get to go to many different congregations.**

**JULIAN OVENDEN:** I do and sometimes they're a cult, sometimes they are amazing and sometimes they are terrible; but I keep coming back. I hope to be coming back to it for a long time. If you don't have passion and drive for it, then forget it.

*Interview with the Actor*  
**Julian Ovenden**