

ORDINARY DAYS

UPSTAGE

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Ordinary Days is an original through-sung musical about four young New Yorkers who have a love/hate affair with New York City. On these pages you will find interviews with the composer/lyricist and director of the production as well as their biographies.

This is the third production of Roundabout Underground, an initiative launched in 2007 to introduce and cultivate artists in Roundabout's 62-seat Black Box Theatre, at the Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre (111 West 46th Street, NYC, NY, 10036). Prior productions include *Speech & Debate* (2007) and *The Language of Trees* (2008).

Interview with the Composer and Lyricist: Adam Gwon



What made you decide you wanted to write for musical theatre?

I studied classical piano from a very young age, and as a teenager got involved in local theater and liked it enough to attend a high school for the arts in Baltimore, where I grew up. Strangely, all through high school, I studied music and theater on parallel tracks with little intersection—theater during the day at school, and piano lessons at night. Thankfully I had a couple of theater teachers who were self-described Sondheim freaks, and they introduced me to his music and lyrics. (I even played 'Franz' in our high school production of *Sunday in the Park with George*. Yes, that's right. A high school production of *Sunday in the Park with George*. It rocked.) But I didn't really

start writing properly until I got to college, and even that happened as sort of a fluke. I came to NYU to study theater thinking I'd focus more on performance. NYU has a rule that you can't audition for shows as a freshman but the rule doesn't say anything about writing music for shows as a freshman, so I started doing that, and quickly became the go-to guy to score plays at NYU. All the while, I had a brilliant, brilliant musical theater performance teacher (whose class I landed in through a fluke as well, but I won't go into that) who was also a composer. Tragically, he passed away and at the end of the year there was a concert of his songs as a memorial to him. It was the first time we had ever heard his music and it was breathtaking. Right after that, I spent the summer up at the Hangar Theater in Ithaca, NY, and there was a call for songs for a cabaret. So I wrote my first song – a musicalization of the James Joyce story "Araby," of all things—and that's how I started. I came back to NYU and let the writing thing take over. My sophomore year, Audra McDonald's debut CD came out, featuring composers like Adam Guettel, Jason Robert Brown, Michael John LaChiusa, and Ricky Ian Gordon. That CD, and seeing Ricky Ian Gordon's *Dream True* at the Vineyard Theater around the same

time, were the final nails in the coffin as it were. Suddenly, I saw the incredible potential that musical theater had to tell a story and I was really drawn to harnessing that potential. So, I suppose it was a confluence of a lot of things that made me want to write for musical theater.

What inspired you to write *Ordinary Days*?

I like to think that the birth of *Ordinary Days* is a really good example of necessity being the mother of invention. A couple years ago, I landed a musical theater writing fellowship at the Dramatists Guild—it's a program run by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty that gives young writers an outlet to develop new work. I had gotten this fellowship on my own, that is, without a collaborator (I usually collaborate with a playwright who writes the book of the musical), and, knowing this, I wanted to design a project that I knew could work with only my skill set in play. I started off just writing a couple songs to see where they would lead me and soon the whole piece came into focus in my mind. I'm a huge believer that form is born out of content, and so, because I knew I'd be stitching together a narrative told through individual songs and vignettes, I came up with this story about people struggling to make connections with each other and with the world around them. It was my thought that the audience would have to actively be connecting the dots of the story as they watched, since the story is essentially told in fragments, and I liked the idea of engaging the audience to make connections in a show about the importance of making connections. You get the idea.

Two other inspirations for the show were my own experiences being an aspiring twenty-something in New York City, and my favorite novel, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, which I was re-reading at the time I wrote *Ordinary Days*. The seed that

started the whole project was me feeling a little bit at sea with, well, how—and if—life worked itself out. As you can imagine, aspiring artists in New York are almost inevitably forced to stitch together a patchwork life. You've got your dayjob, your multitude of creative projects, your social life, your love life, your friends from work, from school, from shows, your family, and on and on, all seemingly leading in different directions. I felt like I was constantly bouncing from one very specific bubble of my daily life to the next, and the question I was asking as I wrote *Ordinary Days* was how do all these pieces add up? As I wrote, I think that question evolved to explore more than just the experiences of a twentysomething in New York, but it all started from a very real, personal place. And as for *Mrs. Dalloway*, well, I just love that book, and I'll leave it to some astute audience members to try and spot my little homage to it in the show.

Which character or characters do you relate to most and why?

Of course I relate in some way to all of the characters in the show, but the one who's most true to me is definitely Warren. To say Warren is a dreamer is a bit of an understatement. He's an eternal optimist but he also uses that optimism to mask feelings of insecurity. He tends to live in a fantasy world and has a hard time reconciling that his real life isn't anything like his fantasy. As a writer, that's pretty much the headspace I live in every day—he tries to connect with the world by isolating himself, which is basically what writers get paid to do! But I do feel a very personal connection to all of the characters in the show. They all think they want something they see way off in the distance, but end up realizing that what they're looking for is much closer and much simpler than they imagined. That's an experience that resonates with me.

“I started off just writing a couple songs to see where they would lead me, and soon the whole piece came into focus in my mind.”

Can you tell us a bit about the production history of the musical? Has it had workshops, readings, or other productions?

As I mentioned before, I wrote this piece during a fellowship at the Dramatists Guild, and after that it had a series of readings and workshops that led to its first production at Pennsylvania Centre Stage, which is the professional theater in residence at Penn State University. Thanks entirely to the internet, the show had a production in London at the Finborough Theatre (a British director stumbled upon my songs on MySpace), and the show was also a part of last year’s National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT) showcase, which is how Roundabout discovered the piece. That showcase is an annual event where producers and artistic directors from all across the country come to check out new musicals, and it was an amazing stepping stone toward the life that the show has now. There was a production this past summer at Adirondack Theatre Festival upstate, also a result of the NAMT festival, and there are two other productions, at South Coast Rep in California and Human Race Theatre Company in Ohio, slated for this season. But I am beyond thrilled to have the show in New York City for many reasons—not the least of which is that New York City really is a fifth character in the show. I remember at NAMT they had a Q&A session with the writers and they asked us where we hoped

the showcase would take our shows, and I felt very strongly that this show belonged in New York at some point. There is a lot in the show that people outside of New York relate to, but I think being a New Yorker will add a whole other level to an audience’s experience of it!

As a composer/lyricist/librettist whose work are you most influenced by?

It was those composers on Audra McDonald’s debut album that made me want to be a musical theater writer, and continue to inspire me to this day—particularly Adam Guettel, Jason Robert Brown, Michael John LaChiusa, and Ricky Ian Gordon. They harnessed the storytelling power of music in ways I hadn’t heard before, which I thought was incredibly exciting. I’ve also worked really hard over the years to write lyrics that don’t suck, and for my money, there’s no better lyricist than Stephen Sondheim.

What are the challenges of writing a musical that is entirely sung through? Or do you see it as a song cycle?

I definitely think of *Ordinary Days* as a musical, and not a song cycle. For me, a song cycle is an evening of songs connected only by some thematic idea, and *Ordinary Days* is most certainly a narrative musical. There are four specific characters who take a journey over the course of the evening and we are following their stories. In knowing that I was going to be writing what is essentially a script-less musical, I think I embraced some of the challenges by marrying the structure to what the story is all about. That said, most of the re-writes I’ve done and am doing involve making sure the through-line of these characters’ stories is clear even though the manner of the telling is fragmented. I suppose one challenge is exactly how to stuff all the information you need in each scene within the limitations of a single song, but I didn’t really think of that so much as a challenge as part of the fun of

it all. It also gave me the chance to write a lot of “story songs,” which I simply adore but don’t get to write a lot of in traditional book musicals, because a story song is essentially a little one-act play all on its own, and most musicals don’t afford you the opportunity to do that very often.

What do you look for in a director and a musical director?

Any director or musical director (or any other type of artist) I want to work with has to have a real spirit of collaboration about them. Musical theater is an unbelievably collaborative art form, and as the writer, I spend a year doing work in a bubble, and really look forward to the time when the collaborative process breathes life into the piece. For directors on a new work, I think the ability to always look at the show as if he or she is looking at it for the first time is important, because you want the director to be a third eye as far as the clarity of the storytelling goes. And I like directors who embrace the theatricality of putting stories onstage. There’s a reason I write pieces for theater and not movies or TV, and I look for directors who like to exploit that theatricality in creative ways. I also love working with directors who have a really strong visual sense—I often start writing pieces with certain images in mind, and want a director who can bring those to life.

I think the best musical directors, for my work at least, are those who in performance really function as an actor in the scene—they are in the moment, responding to what’s going on onstage, ebbing and flowing and reacting just as an actor would. It’s much more exciting to watch a musical director be a dynamic part of the moment than to simply hear the score played by rote.

I also like musical directors who are invested in storytelling, and whose work is always in support of what’s going on story and character-wise in that moment. I think Marc and Vadim (Feichtner, *Ordinary Days* Musical Director) fit the bill in all of these ways, and I’m excited to be collaborating with them on this production.

What attributes must the actors bring to the four roles in *Ordinary Days*?

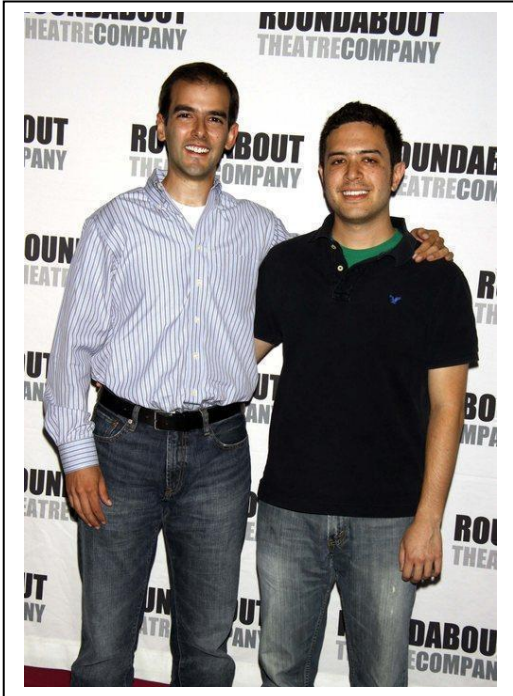
I think that I write musicals about real people going through real things and so the ability to be honest and true while singing a song is key to performing my work. Like my favorite kinds of musical directors, my favorite kinds of actors are those who can be totally in the moment and let nothing get thrown away. My songs often have a conversational quality about them, and an actor with the ability to unpack everything that’s going on, beat to beat and moment to moment, is a good fit for what I write, particularly in *Ordinary Days*, where all of the storytelling is in song. A good deal of musicianship is also important, because it’s the singer’s task to make even the most difficult musical moments feel effortless. During the audition process, Robyn Goodman joked that we needed to find actors who could “speak Gwon,” and I think there was a real truth to that. When an actor clicked with the material, you could feel it right away. And again, particularly with new work, I love working with actors who bring with them a real collaborative spirit and sense of adventure. Writing and acting, and, ultimately, watching theater is all about discovery, and I want to be surrounded by people who are eager to discover what the world—both in and out of the rehearsal room—is all about.

ADAM GWON (Music & Lyrics) is a composer and lyricist named one of “50 to Watch” by The Dramatist magazine, and winner of the 2008 Fred Ebb award for excellence in musical theater songwriting. His musical *Ordinary Days* recently enjoyed a sold-out run at the Finborough Theatre in London, after making its world premiere at Pennsylvania Centre Stage and appearing in the 2008 NAMT Festival of New Musicals and the 2008 ASCAP/Disney Musical Theatre Workshop. His other musicals include *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* (with librettist Julia Jordan) and *Ethan Frome*. His work has been seen at Primary Stages, the York Theatre, New Dramatists, the Flea Theater, American Music Theatre Project, NYMF, Symphony Space, and many others. He’s currently at work on an original musical with playwright Sarah Hammond, commissioned by Broadway Across America; a musical commission from South Coast Rep for a project with Octavio Solis; and an adaptation of Joe Meno’s “The Boy Detective Fails,” commissioned by Signature Theatre in Arlington, VA, as part of its American Musical Voices Project: The Next Generation. Adam and his work were presented in concert at the Kennedy Center as part of their series “Broadway: The Third Generation” and you can watch the concert on their website. Adam was a 2006-07 musical theater fellow at the Dramatists Guild and is a graduate of NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. Upcoming productions of *Ordinary Days* include The Human Race Theater, the Adirondack Theater Company, South Coast Rep and it’s in New York premiere, the Roundabout Theatre Company. Visit www.adamgwon.com.



Interview with the Director:

Interview with the Director: Marc Bruni



What made you decide that you wanted to direct for the theatre and direct musicals in particular?

I recall sitting in the auditorium of George Washington Middle School after my audition for the coveted role of Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*. In the spirit of support for our peers, Mr. Brown had encouraged us to stay and watch our classmates' auditions, but instead of just watching, I pulled a yellow legal pad out of my Trapper Keeper and began taking notes. Chris Harris: Check minus. Can't carry a tune. Peter McCann: Check. Good Job. Better as Templeton, the gluttonous rat? Brian O'Leary: Question mark. Could the confident student council president really pull off the loneliness and vulnerability of the beloved pig? As it turned out, Brian was an inspired choice, with his rendition of "Welcome to Zuckerman Barn" particularly crowd

pleasing. I ended up with the pivotal (okay, not that pivotal) role of "Narrator #3."

Though my high school and college years were marked with many further performances, I never lost that impulse to sit back and look at the larger picture. Theatre for me begins with a story, and I believe the director comes in to focus and clarify that story and craft the experience for an audience. I love the task of making those hundreds of moment-to-moment decisions, and directing a musical means having other people in the room to collaborate on those decisions. It's a far less lonely enterprise than directing a play.

Why did you want to direct *Ordinary Days*?

My first encounter with the piece came about a year and a half ago when I happened to see a reading of a forty minute excerpt at the ASCAP/Disney musical theatre workshop. I was struck by how Adam's work as a songwriter felt unique and contemporary in a way I hadn't heard before. That presentation included the song "I'll Be Here" which, even in a room fully lit with industrial fluorescent lighting, brought everyone to tears. Adam's ability to use vivid details to illuminate larger truths about the human condition made me believe he has a special gift for helping audiences see aspects of themselves in his characters. When Robyn, Josh, and Jill asked me to direct a reading of the piece, I jumped at the chance, and Adam and I went to work.

What do you feel *Ordinary Days* is about?

If I had to boil down the theme into one word, I would say "connection." All four characters begin the show with something

missing in their lives, and over the course of the evening, they examine ways to connect with one other in an attempt to find that missing piece.

“This piece has a slice of life style, so the singing should feel a completely natural extension of the voice.”

In the same way that Bernstein, Comden and Green, Kander and Ebb, Sondheim, and others wrote their tributes to the city, I think this piece is Adam's New York ode telling us to look around, open our eyes, let down our wall of urban cynicism- connect to our environment and to each other.

What kind of research and preparation did you have to do in order to direct this musical?

Because this piece is set in the present and the characters' feelings and conflicts are recognizable in the scope of my life experience, I didn't feel the need to research in the same way I would on a period piece. I did try to get lost at the Metropolitan Museum one Saturday and easily achieved that goal within minutes. The preparation really came in the series of meetings Adam and I had together to discuss fundamental ideas of structure, character development, and style. New material has been added, songs have been cut and reordered, and the conversation continues. Directing a new musical means helping to guide the dramaturgy of the piece- getting the story right. Once the material soars, the staging almost takes care of itself.

What are the challenges of directing a musical that is entirely sung through or a song cycle as opposed to a traditional book musical?

This particular piece started out as essentially a song cycle without a lot of narrative connection. When writing stand alone cabaret songs, as many of the songs from *Ordinary Days* can function, the writer assumes no audience knowledge of the characters or situations, so all the info necessary must be contained in the song itself. This way, it's easy to rely on a personality trait, quirky syntax, or an attitude to carry the song. Once the audience knows the character, however, they are hungry to see the character in action. They want something to happen. A lot of our process in developing this piece has come in finding a clarity in the narrative so the characters remain sympathetic and earn their moments of self reflection.



What were you looking for in casting the actors?

Truthfulness. The Underground space feels extremely intimate, so the audience can easily detect when an actor is “Acting”. I don’t want to see any of that. This piece has a slice of life style, so the singing should feel a completely natural extension of the voice. It’s easy to find singers who can belt the high notes and cry. I wanted actors with an endearing emotional transparency that will make the audience cry. And laugh. And fall in love. Luckily, we have an extraordinary company who do that and also happen to have fantastic voices.

What were you looking for in your musical director?

Above all, I wanted someone who was going to act as a full collaborator in the process and make that process an enjoyable experience. Working on a new show means change. Constantly. It’s critical to have an MD who can examine the work at every point and offer a fresh perspective on how to improve it. On this show, the MD must not only prepare the actors and oversee the arrangements, he must also act as the orchestra! We do have one additional instrumentalist, but I think it’s critical to have a musician who can really perform the

score and make the most of our limited orchestration. Adam and I both knew Vadim (Feichtner, *Ordinary Days* Musical Director) from other projects, and his consummate musicianship and extensive experience developing new musicals made him a logical choice for this show.

How did you go about working with your design team?

At this time we are still very much in the middle of figuring this out. With any design, the challenge lies in taking the limitations of the space and turning them into virtues. Unlike a proscenium house, this space allows for a good deal of flexibility. Lee Savage our set designer and I started by figuring out how we wanted to configure the space. This was ruled not only by aesthetic but practical concerns. Where do we put the musicians? Many of the locations Adam wrote are expansive spaces: exteriors, Central Park, a rooftop, the Met. How do we artfully achieve these given the Underground’s extremely low ceiling? We then discussed a general visual vocabulary for how we were going to indicate the multiple locations, taking inspiration from existing found images. Only then did we get down to the nuts and bolts of where specifically the chair goes on page 14.

MARC BRUNI (Director) won the New York Musical Theatre Festival Directing Award for his production of *Such Good Friends*, and his production of *Glimpses of the Moon* just concluded a sold out run at the Algonquin Hotel Oak Room. He is currently the Associate Director of *Legally Blonde* (Tour/London) and appeared on MTV’s “Search for Elle Woods”. Additional directing credits include Rob Fisher’s Cole Porter and Leonard Bernstein concerts for Lincoln Center Songbook, St. Louis MUNY productions of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *My One and Only*, and *The Music Man* (upcoming). He has been associated with Walter Bobbie, Kathleen Marshall, Jerry Mitchell, and Jerry Zaks on thirteen Broadway shows including Roundabout’s revivals of *The Pajama Game* and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Irving Berlin’s *White Christmas* (10 Productions Internationally), *Grease*, *Wonderful Town*, *High Fidelity*, *Sweet Charity*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, and *Little Shop of Horrors* (Bway/Tour) as well as on *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (NYSF), *South Pacific* (Carnegie Hall/PBS), and City Center Encores! productions of *Finian’s Rainbow*, *No, No, Nanette*, *Applause*, *70, Girls, 70*, and *Bye Bye Birdie*. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College

education

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