

# UPSTAGE

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# ***Interview with the Creative Team:*** ***Director, Stafford Arima*** ***Choreographer, Liza Gennaro*** ***Music Director, Michael Patrick Walker***

The show, for me personally,  
is about how one comes  
through loss in one's life.

## **Why did you all want to do this project?**

**Stafford Arima:** The concept is fascinating. "What if?" always brings a lot of curiosity in the mind of an audience or reader. What if so-and-so met so-and-so? Since Joplin and Berlin had never met, the possibilities of what could transpire in an imaginary meeting were endless. After reading the script, I found myself completely absorbed and engaged in the "what if" possibilities that Mark Saltzman had laid out in the text. I found the script to be completely engrossing about these two great artists and the story about friendship felt compelling to me.

## **And you, Liza?**

**Liza Gennaro:** Like Stafford, I also was very intrigued by this story and this imagined meeting. From a dance perspective, I very much like the period of dance we're looking at, which is late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American vernacular dance. I'm also looking at some of the social dancing of the period, which moves towards the 1910's dance craze. It's a whole period of movement that really appeals to me.

**Michael Patrick Walker:** Certainly I agree with the fascination of "What if?" I think especially with these two historical characters, even if we don't know a lot about them, we know their names. One of the many themes in the show is how Joplin is speaking of creative and artistic impulses and Berlin is very much about cranking out the songs. Joplin is writing opera, which at the time was not necessarily in vogue or popular, and Berlin is writing the hit songs of the day. So I find this period musically is fascinating. I would wager very few people will have heard the lesser known songs of Berlin, the ones from the Lower East Side years before he became "Irving Berlin."

## **How do you prepare to do this work?**

**SA:** I think one of the most challenging aspects of this piece is the magic realism ingredient. There is an extraordinary amount of flashback that happens throughout the show. We rarely stay in one specific date for more than three or four pages. For me, aside from reading biographical material on Berlin and Joplin, I started to think about how this piece could come to life in a unique and fresh way: the use of transition; using a theatrical and filmic vocabulary to propel the story, to *help* the narrative, and to engage an audience in the visual tapestry (wiping, cross fading, jump-cutting). Prior to the rehearsals, I watched a great deal of films.

**LG:** The who, the where, and the why are always essential to me as a choreographer. I can't really make up the dance until I understand and answer those questions. I start there, with the script, and then I begin finding the movement vocabularies, which in this show are pretty clearly dictated; cakewalk and vaudeville material. With this show, there's not a lot of dance numbers proper, where you have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I'm asked to create segments of dances. So it's about finding the best way to incorporate dances that tell the story. In one instance, I draw on methodologies of ballet choreographer William Forsythe using his systems of movement to help me abstract a tango. I search for tools that help me create dance.

**MPW:** For this show in particular, the music exists but it's been very long since it was first printed. Without the definitive recording version (they didn't have those back then), what really is closest to the original piece? Beyond that challenge, what songs, what pieces of music, what underscoring serves the story that's being told? Much like the choreography, we don't do big numbers or songs that start and finish. They are sometimes snippets or sometimes music is integrated within dialogue. It really is a wide open world.

## **Michael, will you be playing piano by yourself?**

**MPW:** No, we'll be doing a two-piano orchestration. A lot of times you have a single person onstage "playing the piano" and it will be one or the other, but there are many moments in the show when both pianos onstage are being played, and then there are moments when there isn't a literal piano being played onstage. We discussed the possibility of having a small orchestra, but in the end it seemed these two men are so iconically associated with piano, Joplin particularly and Berlin as well. And when you put two pianos together, much like

these two men, you can get some fascinating harmonies and some clashes and a lot of interesting things out of that idea.

**What were you looking for in your cast? You needed triple threats, I would imagine.**

**SA:** Triple threats in a unique manner because as we've all mentioned, this isn't a traditional musical where someone is necessarily going to be belting out the high C's. But in essence, I always look for a spark and a fire that is present within the soul of the human being that's auditioning. Whether they can act or sing or dance is in many ways secondary because inevitably the people we get a chance to see can all act and sing and dance to varying degrees. Someone could come in and be an incredible actor but have no life inside of him or her, and sometimes I actually enjoy finding the rougher diamond and using of process of rehearsal to polish that diamond to the brilliance it can be. That's what I look for.

**LG:** It's tricky with dancing because the way people are trained to dance now doesn't help me. Because, first of all, African American vernacular dance is taken from West African dance, and the West African dance aesthetic is very different from, let's say, a classical ballet dance aesthetic. All the lines are different. I had to find people who were able to drop their contemporary training. That's a hard thing to find. And then with the vaudeville character, I needed someone who understands tap, but they have to understand it from an early 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective, because now what we think of as tap is wrong for what was appropriate then. We *did* find the right people, and we did really well, but it wasn't easy.

**When you say tap was different, could you expound on that?**

**LG:** Well, tap now is in the world of Savion Glover, which draws upon the hip hop aesthetic so it doesn't have the performance quality of, say, a Bill "Bojangles" Robinson." I use him as an example because there's still footage of him that we can see. Glover has focused his tap dancing on his musicianship more than a traditional performance style. He looks down, he doesn't use a port de bras with his arms like tap dancers did in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That's a primary difference. And then there's also the kind of showbiz tap, which is again, different from Savion Glover's tap. The showbiz tap tends to be really overly-clean. Whereas an early 20<sup>th</sup> century tap dance style was more ragged, in a way, a little more crooked, a little more idiosyncratic. Very specific to the performer.

**MPW:** Musically, it's tricky, because everybody sings in this show. However, some are more demanding vocal roles range-wise, like Freddie/Treemonisha, than others. She has to be able to sing a legit high soprano but she sings for probably

less than three minutes in the entire two hours of the show. Somebody like Joplin was primarily known for instrumental music, so he spends a lot of his time playing the piano, but he still does sing at one point in time. For Mooney, the vaudeville character, we need to believe that he was headlining in a vaudeville show, so there the demands are a little bit greater vocally, but even he sings maybe two or three minutes spread throughout the show. In a way, it feels like we're asking more of the actors than we would in a normal musical partially because in a musical, if you cast a dancer or a really good singer, then you use them for 5, 6, 7 numbers in the show. Here, we need the same amount of skill and, in some ways more, but then we ask them to do it for thirty seconds. We found a great group, absolutely, but it was a challenge.

**What's the show about for you? What's the personal resonance?**

**SA:** The show, for me personally, is about how one comes through loss in one's life. Both of these characters experience loss in very profound ways. Both lose someone very close to them in a very short period of time. How does one overcome that type of tragedy? How does one deal with the sadness of losing a loved one? Whether you are a famous person like Irving Berlin or a seamstress from Queens, we all experience loss in the same way. The emotional gravitas of loss is universal. And so, I was deeply moved by that element in this story. I lost my mother last year, and her passing had a profound effect on me. It made me, even prior to reading this script, reevaluate how I deal with loss. So when I read the script in the Fall of '08, and my mother passed away in February of '08, I was moved and touched and found that this piece stepped away from something merely biographical and moved into human stories and experiences that transcended any celebrity or public figure.

**LG:** For me, the piece is about art and the artist's process and the tensions between the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceit of high art and low art and how these two men reconciled and negotiated those tensions.

**MPW:** I guess, appropriately, I'm sort of somewhere in the middle. To me, it's about these men as artists and how, even though we don't all compose, most people want something sometime in their life that isn't concrete. These men, both of them, came from very humble beginnings. Literally, as poor as you can get, both of them, in different ways and in different times. They had this ability and drive and it took them in different directions, and yet, as Stafford said, they had a lot in common in the things that could have crippled them artistically. I think it's fascinating to see how these artists interact, what they have in common, what they don't have in common, and in the end how they take that thing that isn't concrete and make it real.

**If Berlin or Joplin were to walk into the room, what would you ask them?**

**LG:** I'd ask Joplin, "What was the 'ragtime dance'?" That one was very hard to research.

**MPW:** I think my question would be similar, particularly with Joplin. He died very young, but we don't really know how he really would've wanted the rags played. For years the Joplin piano rags were played as fast as you could possibly go, and it's my belief that that's not really how they would've been played. There would have been a different interpretation. But unfortunately, we don't know. In the Ragtime Dance, Joplin wrote detailed instructions about how he wanted the piano player to stomp the heel of their foot without taking their toe off the ground. So I'm sure he had very definite ideas about how he wanted the music played. It's hard to know how close we're getting.

**SA:** I guess if they both walked into the room, I'd want to know what each of them felt about the music scene today. Not necessarily musical theatre, but the world of rap and the world of pop rock and what their sensibilities would be towards that kind of music. Would Berlin be listening to Lady Gaga and Joplin listening to Britney Spears? I would be interested in their reaction to how music has changed from the Victorian world of Joplin to the post-Victorian world of Berlin. I'd be curious to hear their thoughts--

**MPW:** --Especially because those guys in their time were at the forefront. They both advanced and changed music.

**What inspires you as artists?**

**SA:** What inspires me about any art form is the possibility of transforming an audience. Even one person in that audience, if he or she is changed, enlightened by something that happened on that stage, whether it's a beautiful piece of choreography, an interpretation of a song, or a piece of text. I feel that we as artists have a huge responsibility to not only entertain but to enlighten and to push an audience to think and to debate and be transformed by the experience. If one person is changed in the theater by something that we've worked on together, then I feel we've done our job. That inspires me, to think that we have that potential.

**LG:** I am endlessly fascinated by dance. What I love about working in musical theatre is that you get to work on all different kinds of dance, all the time. I'm very interested in what dance can bring to music and text. What's the function of dance in any given piece of theatre? It's a problem that I like to solve. It's a problem I like to be challenged by.

**MPW:** It sounds simplistic, but in the end, it's the craft. I'm inspired by the craft of telling the story. Story with a capital "S" or a little "s." It can be to move the audience. It can be silly slapstick and they laugh hysterically. It can be a meaningful, artistic, deep thing. You have to figure out how to best tell the story and that's something you never really completely answer.

**I wanted to finish by asking if there's a question I should've asked, but didn't?**

**SA:** This piece is an anomaly. It is not a mere play. It is not a mere musical. I have found it difficult to put a label on it. We're constantly forcing ourselves, in each of our departments, to take all of the ingredients and bring them together in a way that isn't really a play and isn't really a musical. I hope when people leave, they don't even have to define it in their heads. I hope they are absorbed by this experience.

**MPW:** There are *so* many songs. *So* many things that we *could* put in, but what's enough to tell the story and also satisfy the audience? At its heart, it's a two person play that has a cast of twelve and a bunch of music in it--

**SA:** --and songs and dancing--

**LG:** --and dancing!

**SA:** It's a balancing act. It's balancing the musical vocabulary, the play vocabulary, the dance vocabulary, the underscoring vocabulary, and all of them coming together in this great new hybrid called the *Tin Pan Alley Rag*.

# Interview with the Author: Mark Saltzman

**What was your inspiration for this show? You've been working on it for over a decade, is that correct?**

**MS:** It's not the only thing I've worked on or else I'd be a little nutty. When *Tin Pan Alley Rag* comes into my life as a new production, there's usually some new ideas, if not from me, then from the collaborators like Stafford and Michael Patrick that make it fresh again, make me want to work on it again.

**I read in an interview that you uncovered the fact that Berlin and Joplin were living simultaneously in New York, while you were researching *Mrs. Santa Claus*, a TV special you wrote for Angela Lansbury. Is that true?**

**MS:** Yes, it's true. They are both set around the same period, New York before World War I, which was an optimistic time in American history. When I was doing the research for *Mrs. Claus*, I saw that Scott Joplin was around at that time, in 1915, and thought "oh, look, he's living in New York". And "oh look Irving Berlin was already running and a superstar". That was news to me. It turns out Irving Berlin was very young, immensely wealthy, charismatic and wrote one song after another. I began to wonder, well if they were in this music business together, these two American icons, wouldn't they have bumped into each other at some point? And I just started setting out what might have happened. They were such different sorts of personalities. My immediate thought was "well, they probably wouldn't have hit it off." Tin Pan Alley, the commercial music world, was pretty much the enemy to Scott Joplin, who had a strong artistic vision that Ragtime was going to encompass opera and symphonic music. And Tin Pan Alley was basically: write a song, sell it, write the next song. It was a little like pop culture is today. Joplin and Berlin had clashing philosophies and personalities and personal goals.

**Has the piece changed every time it's had a production?**

**MS:** Things change every time you produce them, new directors, new actors. As far as script changes, while I'm available to work on it, I'm happy to listen to directors' ideas. I would say there haven't been any fundamental structural changes to it. That's all been pretty much the same since the beginning. But for the Roundabout production, I wrote a whole new scene with Joplin's wife.

That wasn't in any production before. We felt the character wasn't quite served enough and I agreed.

**Did you start with the libretto and then figure out which songs were available to you? Or did you start with the music? Talk a little bit about the process, because it seems like it must have been very complicated.**

**MS:** It was very complicated because one of the rules I set for myself, early on, was that this was going to be naturalistic, and more of a play with songs in it than a traditional musical. There are a lot of tragic elements in these two lives; and on Joplin's side, a great deal of artistic frustration and, of course, the racism of the time. It seemed like it needed something grittier or more realistic than the traditional musical theatre style. I knew that right off the bat. So, it wasn't finding a place for existing songs, like *Mamma Mia*. It wasn't so much that as illustrating what these two guys had come up with as artists. In Tin Pan Alley, what people actually did in that era, was to burst into offices and start singing. That actually happened and there was a desperation to it. So it is very realistic that people would come into an office and sing songs, which is how *Tin Pan Alley Rag* starts, but the impulse that makes them sing, isn't a musical theatre impulse, it's a very commercial, work-a-day, sometimes desperate impulse.

**You seem to be dealing with the theme of art vs. commerce.**

**MS:** Yes that's pretty much it. I'm channeling what these two characters were making the themes of their lives. With Joplin, there was a belief that Ragtime was going to be this transformational force of music. Remember, there hadn't been an African-American music that hit the entire country before Ragtime. There were spirituals, there were work songs and there was some early blues; but Ragtime was the kind of music that the entire country went for. Teddy Roosevelt's daughter was demanding the Marine Band in the White House play Ragtime. It was just the coolest, the hippest thing, and that hadn't happened before. Really, someone like Scott Joplin was going to take this and he was going to elevate it, so that it would be as good as any music from Europe. It was going to be as good as Chopin's piano music, it was going to be as good as Verdi's operas, and he was going to demonstrate this. He was going to write those etudes and nocturnes; he didn't call them that, he called them

rags, but he gave them titles that were just as beautiful – “Heliotrope Bouquet”, “Elite Syncopations”. This was going to be beautiful piano music, like Schubert. And that’s a real vision. You get the art vs. commerce struggle because that’s what happens in 1915 when Joplin comes to Berlin and Tin Pan Alley in New York after writing a Ragtime African-American Opera, *Treemonisha*.

**Did you learn something new about both men as you worked on it? Were you surprised by what you uncovered as you delved into these two characters?**

**MS:** Yes. I was constantly surprised. One surprise was Scott Joplin’s manner and motivating behavior. He’s from the Victorian Era and had some of those values. That was a kind of surprise; how he presented himself to the world. And with Berlin it was the surprise of his youth. Coming from nothing, basically having to start waiting tables at thirteen-years-old and scraping for jobs and then by the time he was 23 or 24, he was a superstar. Both of them, without giving away too much, had gone through similar tragedies in their personal lives. That was also something that I had no idea about.

**Did you find that there were songs that you wanted to use from both composers and couldn’t? Or did you find a place for everything you wanted to use?**

**MS:** Oh boy, you know which one comes to mind? A Joplin piano rag that I was dying to find a place for and finally in the Roundabout Production, we did. I am so happy about that. It’s called “Bethena.” On occasion, Joplin would be writing in these more European modes – except with rag in it. And this one is a waltz that he was raggin’ and he called this waltz “Bethena” and I just love it. It was also used in the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. It’s also a well-known piano piece for piano recitals and, finally, it is in this production. I found a place for it.

**Can you tell me what you look for in a director and actors?**

**MS:** Oh sure. What’s interesting about Stafford is that he’s Canadian, he’s not American. I don’t think I would have said “oh you know, this needs to be directed by somebody who doesn’t have an American upbringing”. I don’t think that would have occurred to me. But the fact that Stafford comes in with that kind of distance, he brings a sensibility to it that is different. He’s Canadian from a Japanese background. So he looks at Americana from the outside. That is helping to bring a special characteristic to this production. With the actors, we have a sense of what Irving Berlin looked like. We know

that he was a slim, slight, Jewish looking guy, and right off the bat, when you’re casting you have to kind of acknowledge that. This is the sort of physicality that we expect. There’s so many sides to Joplin. So it was looking about for the actor that would plug into the goodhearted visionary, but also having that Don Quixote aspect – having an artistic vision and pursuing it to whatever end.

**How do audiences respond to this piece? What have you noticed?**

**MS:** In some ways it’s something they haven’t seen before. We were having trouble all along finding a model for this and we thought, “We’re out here with something new.” This is a play with music, a dual biography rather than one character’s biography. I think audiences are very pleased to hear some of the familiar songs like “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” It’s always nice to have something recognizable; something you have good memories about; that you’ve heard before. I think that there’s this sense of pleasure in hearing something like Joplin’s “The Entertainer” that you know backwards and forwards because ice cream trucks play it, music boxes play it. It’s always a nice feeling for me when Scott Joplin plays “The Entertainer” and people applaud. They’re applauding the recognition; they’re also just pleased: “Oh I know the composer of this now! I know who Scott Joplin is. That makes me happy, I think I’ll clap.” That’s always a response that I’m gratified to get because, apart from everything else, it opens some doors to hear the history of Ragtime.

**“The Entertainer” is the piece that was used in the film *The Sting*, yes?**

**MS:** Yes.

**And do you think that’s probably why people recognize it?**

**MS:** I think people who lived during the premiere of *The Sting* know it from that. It was on the pop charts. It’s a part of piano practice now. Anybody who plays piano usually gets to play that piece. It’s a very swingin’ little piece. It’s not hard. It’s one of those tunes like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”. It’s so ingrained, you don’t realize you know it so well. Certainly, *The Sting* gave it a new life in the 70s, but it’s been expanding and expanding since then.

**Do many people ask you if they actually met?**

**MS:** Yes, many people do. That’s often the first question and all I can say is that it would be pretty unlikely that

they didn't. They had their offices so close to each other in New York City, they would have had to be avoiding each other. They would have had to make a point of not meeting because the music business was small. The thing is, it wouldn't have been a huge event when they met. It would have been just...in the scheme of things when Joplin was trying to get his opera published. What we know is that Joplin tried everything: auditions, sending out manuscripts. To think that he wouldn't have gone to one of the major, major publishers, Berlin and Snyder; there would be a story as to why he would have avoided it.

**Do you know for a fact if Berlin went to *Treemonisha* in the 70's when it was performed?**

**MS:** No, I don't know that for a fact. I do know that during his reclusive years he did flit in to theatres to see shows, often not at the beginning, often during the course of the show. He would kind of slip in and out and that's how he kept up with theatre. So once again, why would he go to *Treemonisha* if he was doing that? He'd have to have a really, really good reason not to, especially since Joplin would be a figure from his songwriting days. My guess is he would remember Scott Joplin's, "The Maple Leaf Rag". I can't imagine he wouldn't be curious to see what Joplin's opera looked like when it was produced. So once again, I think it's more than likely; I feel that I can put it on the stage. If it were completely unlikely or preposterous, I wouldn't. For the biographical material I've tried to stick pretty straight to the record. I really didn't have to surmise.

**It seems that most of your choices are based in the logic of "well, this could have happened."**

**MS:** I'm connecting the dots, more than trying to create something out of the blue.

**You've been a detective in many ways...**

**MS:** Yes, I've been Sam Spade on the case, tracking down any little granule of interest or detail. This was not a chore in the research department, this was a delight.

**Is there a question you wish I had asked you?**

**MS:** I think the fact that *Tin Pan Alley Rag* is such a New York story is of particular interest to the Roundabout audience. My roots in New York are pretty deep. I am excited by the fact that people in New York are going to share what has been private for me; it is extremely gratifying that *Tin Pan Alley Rag* has come home.

# *Interview with the Actors: Michael Boatman and Michael Therriault*

**Why did you want to play the roles of Scott Joplin and Irving Berlin?**

**Michael Boatman:** I have to say that I honestly didn't know that much about Scott Joplin. When I read the play, what attracted me to Joplin was this idea that he created, essentially, a music form. He certainly took Ragtime to a mainstream awareness in this country. I was attracted to his legacy. The challenge for me is how do you make an iconic figure a human being and accessible and yet communicate the great legacy he left to the world.

**Michael Therriault:** I've always been a big fan of Irving Berlin's music, but I was unaware of just how prolific he was. I knew nothing about his life, so I found this play extremely interesting

**How are you preparing for your roles?**

**MB:** When you focus on preparing for a part, all of the elements of the part affect you in your every day life. I'm hearing Ragtime music everywhere I go. I find myself thinking about people that I knew when I was a child. Some of whom probably grew up with Joplin's music. Having grown up in Chicago and the community in which I did, I have an aunt who was in her 90s when she passed and she owned an operated a saloon in Chicago. I find myself going back to those days, and those people, trying to connect. Hearing Joplin's music takes me into a real place in my own background. I feel in some ways I'm channeling people who are no longer here but very dear to me.

**Have you read a biography of him?**

**MB:** I've read biographies. It's an interesting thing to read a biography because you're still getting someone else's take on Joplin's life. I'm always a little bit leery of that because in some ways it can limit my own creativity. But, yes, I'm doing a lot of reading.

**MT:** Like Michael, I've read a couple of biographies. And, of course, they don't always agree. What has been most exciting about doing this in New York is that this is Berlin's city. Also, the Lincoln Center library has the largest collection of Berlin recordings available. So there's a huge wealth of information

here to draw upon. I couldn't think of a better place to be doing this show.

**What have you discovered the play is about?**

**MB:** I think the play is relevant because it is about muses and the power of inspiration and how creativity can elevate the human experience. These are two men who have both lost people and they're strangers in a strange land. Their music shows that.

**MT:** It's about a bunch of things: artists using creativity as an outlet as well as a protection. This play is about loss, it's about friendship and the nature of art. It touches on all these things.

**MB:** I am just going to say that I think it's a play about the power of legacies. These two men were integral in creating the musical legacies we all know today. It's about the creation of what are the roots of American pop music today.

**MT:** Two outsiders trying to find their place in America. That's huge too.

**MB:** And blending together musical forms, creating something new that's never been seen before.

**MT:** And how an attempt to assimilate themselves into American Society was expressed in their music. Both Berlin and Joplin's music was considered edgy in its day. It's easy to forget that. We think Ragtime music is this old-time-music, but it wasn't considered so at the time.

**If Berlin and Joplin were to walk in the room right now, what would you ask them?**

**MT:** I would ask Berlin why he never talked about his first wife.

**Do you feel you already know the answer?**

**MT:** Well, as much as it pertains to this play.

**He married a socialite afterwards, right? I was reading that her father was very much against it. And then the father-in-law fell on hard times and Berlin came to the rescue.**



**MT:** Yes, that's what I've read as well. He married Dorothy Goetz when he was 24 and Ellin Mackay when he was 38.

**Mark, the playwright, told me the scene with Joplin's wife was added for this production.**

**MB:** Yes.

**Is there something you would ask Joplin about?**

**MB:** It's a question I would ask any artist or any performer of great stature whose gone: Did you have any idea that you would one day become an icon, or were you doing what came naturally to you?

**What do you look for in a director?**

**MB:** For me, what's important in a director is the ability to communicate with the actor in an active way. An effective director needs to be able to communicate not only an idea but a vision in a way that gives an actor a way to grip the text and flesh it out. Some directors I've worked with speak in generalities and it can lead an actor to being confused. The most important thing that a director has to bring to any project is a vision.

**MT:** That's definitely something that Stafford has. He's also a very positive director. When people are being creative, he makes sure to stress what he likes. This makes the creative process very enjoyable and stops the actor from throwing out "the baby with the bathwater." What I also really like about this whole experience is that it's felt very collaborative. It's so exciting when people feel comfortable enough to throw in ideas.

**MB:** That comes from the director too. The director sets the tone. The tone gets set from the top down. I think Stafford's process is very open and flexible, so you do feel comfortable about contributing.

**Do both of you have to learn how to play piano?**

**MT:** We have to learn how to convincingly appear to play the piano.

**MB:** I say I'm taking fake piano lessons every day. I don't play the piano, I don't play an instrument but I do love music and I do futz around. I want to make it convincing. I feel my hands are down south of where they need to be on the keyboard and I go: "That's not right." I'm a little bit of a perfectionist in that way.

**What about singing and dancing? Will you be doing a lot of singing and dancing?**

**MB:** I sing one song. Joplin and Berlin sing one song together. So I don't sing very much and that's a mercy because I don't consider myself a singer at all. So I'm breathing a bit of a sigh of relief. I've been in musicals in the past, but not since college. I don't think of myself as a musical theatre performer. So this is a perfect role for me because Joplin doesn't have to sing well and he doesn't have to dance well.

**MT:** I do sing a bit. I sing a few songs in this. But as many people know, Berlin wasn't known for his singing.

**I heard him singing "Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" in a movie, I think.**

**MT:** Yes, that was in *This is the Army*. Dancing wise, there's a little dancing, but none for Joplin and Berlin.

**So do you consider this a play with songs or a musical? What form is this?**

**MB:** I think it's a musical play. I think of it as a play first. But there's music in it. And it's about music. The music a big part of it. But I don't think of it as a musical.

**MT:** I agree with you.

**How did you both become actors?**

**MB:** I'm the cliché. I did it to meet a girl. To meet chicks. I was in high school and I tried out for the high school play because literally this girl I had a crush on was in my high school theatre department.

**And she's no longer doing it anymore?**

**MB:** No, not at all. It's so strange because in high school, we had a few jocks, a couple of cheerleaders, we had dungeons and dragons guys, and somehow they would all come into the theatre and we were a big family. And then I discovered I seemed to have some sort of facility for it.

**And did you go to school?**

**MB:** I went Western Illinois University, which has a greatly underrated program in Macomb, Illinois. I was a theatre major there. It's one of the great programs in the Midwest, for sure. I came out of it at a time when some of the great state universities in Illinois were grinding out powerful actors like John Malkovich and a lot of those guys from Illinois State. I did a film right out of college, basically. I moved to New York, and then moved on to L.A. I was there for ten years and came back here after that.

**MT:** When I was five my parents put me and my siblings into tap classes. When I was ten or so, I had a good idea I wanted to do this for a living. It's kind of cheesy, but *Fame* was on TV at the time, and I thought "there must be a high school like this in Canada." So I opened the phone book and I found three schools in Toronto. I phoned them and they sent me information, but when I showed it to my parents and said "no" because the schools were too far away. But then, in grade 8, I learned a classmate was going to audition, so I tagged along and got accepted. Still, my parents were concerned. So my principal stepped in and said: "Look, we'll arrange for all the funding, and we'll arrange his transportation" (it was an hour and a half on public transit), and he talked my parents into finally letting me go. In school, I got some work and an agent. Then I went to college. I just kept doing it. That's how it happened.

**You got an agent when you were in high school?**

**MT:** Yes, I got my agent when I was 15. The cool thing was my parents always stayed out of it. They were always extremely supportive, but they just didn't know anything about the business. All that mattered to them was that I was happy and that I was safe.

**If a young person asked you for advice in terms of being an actor, what would you say?**

**MB:** I would tell them, as I always do when people ask me, that going to college and studying theatre gave me a life. It certainly gave me a career, but more than that, it gave me a passion that I never had, it gave me a focus that I never had. So I would say you have to study. People don't think acting is something that requires study. But acting does require study; it requires a context. I've been so richly rewarded, not just financially. I've been nurtured by the arts. I would tell any young aspiring performers to submerge themselves in acting and see what it's like to stand on a stage in front of 500 people and forget your lines. The muscles that you develop from that experience will serve you for your entire life and your career.

**MT:** I think if you want a career as an actor, the most important thing is that you have to really, really love it. It's a stressful, unstable, and transient life. A teacher once said to me: "I've never been rich. I'll never be rich. But I love to get up and go to work." You really need to be comfortable with that idea.

**MB:** You have to love it. Because you don't know where it's going to lead you.

**MT:** It's also nice to have a mentor; I've been very lucky to have people in my life like that. I was fortunate enough to be

in the Stratford Festival company for 7 years. When you're in an ensemble that has really young actors working with actors who are 80, 90...and you're doing 21 shows in 7 years with these people, it's like school, but it's also like family. One of the older actresses there, I saw her in the hallway once, and she said in tears, "I'm so lost, I don't know what I'm doing." I remember thinking "you don't know what you're doing???" I kind of felt relieved, like "oh I guess we always feel like that". I always thought I was the guy who didn't know what he was doing and I was going to be found out. Knowing amazing actors sometimes felt lost too was somehow a giant relief.

**Is there a question that I should have asked but didn't? Anything you'd like to say about the play or the men you're playing?**

**MT:** I don't think an audience should feel like they need to know about Joplin or Berlin before they come in. It's an interesting story and you can come in without preparation and you'll really enjoy it.

**MB:** I think the play shows how time heals all wounds. These guys were titans. We think of their music as gone and faded in a way. But when you hear it, it's just as powerful and evocative as it was years ago.

# education

## ROUNABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

For more information about Roundabout Theatre Company's Education Department, please visit our website, <http://www.roundabouttheatre.org/education.htm>, or email us at [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org).

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