



Quarterly Newsletter of the International Centre for Women Playwrights

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UNCONVENTIONAL PRESENTATIONS by Judy Freed

The audience hiked across the grass, then disappeared into the forest. As I followed them toward the trees I wondered: what have I gotten myself into? I'd written this musical for traditional productions. How would it play outdoors with the audience hiking to a different location for each scene? And what would happen two weeks later, when the same show was produced by a different theater company using life-size puppets?

Last fall my musical *Sleepy Hollow* received two unconventional productions. The first, by Chicago-based Theatre-Hikes, was staged at outdoor venues across the Chicago area. The second, by Michigan's Acorn Theater, was a sophisticated puppet show combining elements of shadow and bunraku puppetry.

Having two such unusual productions in performance at the same time was both exhilarating and terrifying. Along the way, I learned some important lessons about writing musicals for nontraditional presentation.

The lessons started with casting. Director Lara Tibble explained the Theatre-Hikes requirements: Energy is key. Actors need to be fit enough to hike one to two miles and still deliver a strong performance. Some actors would double as instrumentalists, so we'd be looking for solid players with portable instruments. And above all else, we'd need actors whose voices could carry. There are so many uncontrollable sounds outdoors: birds, airplanes, cars, the wind. If an actor can't project, the wind will just blow their words away.

A little voice in my head started to panic. This is a musical! The wind can't blow our words away!

Casting at Acorn Theater was even more discombobulating. We actually needed three casts for the puppetry production. Live actors would voice the roles. Puppeteers would manipulate the puppets' bodies. And the puppets themselves--our physical "cast"--would be designed and built by director Kim Clark and his staff. As Kim showed me the sketches I began to realize what a leap of faith we were taking.

Which brings us to the orchestrations. At Theatre-Hikes, the instruments had to be portable and primarily acoustic. We ended up with a flute, a violin, and a keyboard on a wheeled cart. At Acorn Theater, the instruments included a well-amplified rhythm section and an old-fashioned pipe organ whose pipes were built into the theater's walls. There wasn't enough time to create two sets of orchestrations for these totally different ensembles. So composer Elizabeth Doyle prepared a single score with a piano part, vocal lines, chord markings, and two staves of counter-melodies. We'd have to rely on the music directors to take it from there.

We took another leap of faith when director Lara Tibble asked for some script changes. At Theatre-Hikes, she explained, our only "sets" would be trees, rocks and

bushes. And because nature is so real, any pantomimed set pieces might come across as distractingly false. Would I mind getting rid of all the indoor sets? I cringed. In other productions of our show, some of the biggest laughs had come from bits about doors and windows. But what she said made sense. So our indoor scenes were rewritten for outdoor locations. Our nighttime scenes were reworked for staging in daylight.

At Acorn Theater, we had a different set of concerns. Clever lyrics and rapid-fire dialogue that had been funny in every other production seemed plodding and overdone here. I couldn't figure out why. Then Kim Clark showed me a set of storyboards he had made for the overture. Suddenly I understood. Puppetry is a visual medium. In many ways it's like animated film. If there's nothing to look at but talking heads, the scene goes flat. So lyricist Owen Kalt and I began working on cuts.

Meanwhile, the little voice in my head panicked again. One of the most important moments in our show was a love ballad that had always been staged with two characters alone in a spotlight. Would this pivotal moment fall flat when performed by puppets?

Finally our opening days arrived. The Theatre-Hikes production was pure magic: walking through the trees at the peak of their fall colors; watching scenes play out on hilltops and at the edge of a small lake. It was a fast, funny, larger-than-life production. We knew we had a hit on our hands when a group of young teenagers who had been socializing in the park stopped to listen to a song...then joined the hike for the rest of the show.

Two weeks later, Acorn Theater spun magic of a darker kind. From the moment we entered the theater, we were transported to a richly textured world of movement, sound, special effects, and emotional intensity. When the love ballad began I crossed my fingers. As the music rose, the puppets and their puppeteers rose into the air on a hydraulic lift--a simple, eloquent gesture that saved the song. As for the climactic scene where Ichabod Crane meets the Headless Horseman....all I can say is that it was so eerie I had trouble falling asleep that night.

So what advice would I give to a playwright considering a nontraditional production of a traditional script?

- Saying "yes" to a nontraditional production can be a tremendous leap of faith. Make sure the people you'll be working with are experts in their form. Make sure you feel good about the direction that they'll be taking with your piece.
- Some nontraditional theaters are not accustomed to working with outside authors. Make sure your input will be welcome. Have a contract that includes all the protections you would expect in a conventional production.
- Having said the above, be willing to listen and learn. Be flexible when it's for the good of the production. This is your chance to try something new.

- Most of all, embrace the experience. Your work may grow in ways you never could have imagined. Your own definition of "theater" might be changed forever.

As for *Sleepy Hollow* ... I hear there's a theater troupe in Chicago that performs on horseback. I wonder if they'd be interested in a musical....

Judy Freed has written the books for five musicals including *Sleepy Hollow*; *Emma & Company*; and *Me and Al*, or *How I Died in the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre*. <http://www.freedwrites.com>. Copyright 2005 by Judy Freed.

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