

Hamilton Dramaturgy's Blog
Hosted by [Anne Hamilton](#)
<http://hamiltondramaturgy.wordpress.com>
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One of my favorite Theatre Artists I Love to Follow (TALF) is having a reading of his new musical in Los Angeles on May 21st. Andrew Barrett and I have been working together since 1998, and I'm proud to say that I've often served as his dramaturg on both stage plays and musicals. Here is a short article in which he describes the development of the piece, including its being one of four new musicals selected for development in the ASCAP/DreamWorks Musical Theatre Workshop in LA this past February under the mentorship of Stephen Schwartz.

Details for the Blank Theatre's Living Room Series

Monday May 21st, 8pm
Stella Adler Theatre, 6773 Hollywood Blvd, Hollywood, CA

BETWEEN TIME & TIMBUKTU: A VONNEGUT MUSICAL
Book & Lyrics by Andrew Barrett
Music by Ira Antelis
Directed by Kirsten Sanderson

For more information and to RSVP: <http://theblank.com/pages/livingroomseries.html>

Anne Hamilton: Congratulations on this new development in the life of this musical. What are the new features you've added for this reading?

Andrew Barrett: The [ASCAP/DreamWorks](#) workshop is an astonishing experience for writers of the musical theatre. You perform in front of an audience of 150 theatre lovers, mostly writers, and then a distinguished panel critiques you in front of everyone. You need a thick skin! The panelists who listen to your work and critique it are simply the best of the best. In addition to Stephen Schwarz, we were fortunate to have such intelligent minds as Irene Mechhi, Bill Damaschke, Paul Lazarus and Mark Saltzman. All offered invaluable insights.

However, they are only listening to up to 50 minutes of your show. If you understand the structure of musicals you know why they do this. A musical must have certain elements at very specific moments in the show. I do not know one successful musical over the decades that has not followed these rules.

What makes a show unique is how it plays with this format. But you must follow this format. This includes the opening number that sets the audience on the path with the show ("I Hope I Get It" from A CHORUS LINE and "Comedy Tonight: from A FUNNY THING HAPPENED..."). Shortly after, your leading character must have the I Want song. This is often mocked by haters

of musical theatre (or lovers, such as the Orlando theme in *BOOK OF MORMON*). Within the first hour, that leading character must face some sort of revelation that gives new perspective to what they want. (“And I’m Telling You…” from *DREAMGIRLS*).

So we did our 50 minutes and we learned something important. Our opening was spot on, and we had the audience with us right away. But then we lost them because we were not clear about what our leading character wanted. We waited too long to state it. In addition, once he was off and running, he suddenly went from being very active to being passive, an observer of action he would later act upon.

All of the panelists picked up on this problem and gave us invaluable feedback to help improve things. This new version of the script addresses those two major adjustments. It also meant cutting one of our beloved characters. But sometimes, as they say, you have to kill your babies.

AH: How did you come to write this musical?

AB: The truth is, I’ve been writing this musical my whole adult life. I first fell in love with Vonnegut, like millions of others, when I was a teenager. When I was 15, I discovered the published teleplay our musical is based on and I began trying to adapt it. The longer I live the closer I get to understanding how to successfully tell this story. More than anything else I have written it is so closely aligned dramatically and thematically to who I am. This version has been in development since August of 2009.

We did an informal reading in Chicago, where my brilliant composer/collaborator Ira Antelis lives. That reading provided us with one of the most crucial components for moving forward - a producer! A dear friend, Josh Felderstein, had done well with investing in the Broadway production of *THE COLOR PURPLE*. He offered his financial support to develop our musical.

So we were able to do a big, fancy Broadway staged reading in January of 2010. That afforded us two fantastic development opportunities. The first was in November 2010. We did a student workshop at The Boston Conservatory. If you ever lose faith in musical theatre simply spend one day with the brilliant students and faculty at my undergrad alum. That was a real privilege.

From there, Peter Flynn at The Hanger Theater in Ithaca, NY offered to develop the musical in their gorgeously renovated theatre in the heart of Kurt Vonnegut country (yes, he’s from Indiana, but he went to Cornell). Kirsten Sanderson has since come on board to help us develop it further and her artistic home is The Blank Theatre in LA. And so…here we are!

AH: What do you hope that people will take away from this reading?

AB: Kurt Vonnegut wanted as many people as possible to read his books. He made his books easy to get into and an absolute joy to get through. He did not use big, fancy words and sentence structure. But underneath his hugely accessible style were strong Humanist ideas (Vonnegut was

a Humanist). His love of the idea of America was only second to his fear of its inevitable fate. These are the same things Ira and I think about and feel.

We want audiences to have an easy time getting into our show and then have an absolutely joyous experience throughout. But when they get home, perhaps something begins to stir. They think about Stony and his mother and the world they live in and they start to think about their own world. We hope they are completely entertained, and then surprisingly provoked after the fact.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share our history and thoughts. I hope this has proven informative and in some way to useful to anyone reading it.

AH: Thank you, Andrew. It's always a pleasure to learn from you.