

THOSE MAGIC CHANGES

In case you haven't noticed, the American musical is changing keys and adding new voices. **SCOTT MILLER's** small theatre in St. Louis is keeping score.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT



WHEN THE MUSICAL *HIGH FIDELITY* CLOSED abruptly after just 13 unlucky performances on Broadway, composer Tom Kitt and lyricist Amanda Green were nursing their wounds—and then they got a call from St. Louis, Mo. Somebody there loved, loved, *loved* their show, and wanted to mount the first regional production. Though this stage adaptation of the beloved Nick Hornby novel and Stephen Frears film about a passionate pop-music fan and his rocky love life had been roundly panned by critics and resoundingly rejected by audiences in New York, a guy named Scott Miller desperately wanted to do the first regional production at his scrappy little New Line Theatre.

The show wasn't yet officially licensed (it's now available via Playscripts) and the score still needed some cleanup, but Miller nabbed the rights, and his 2008 production got raves from St. Louis critics. And it still gets high marks from lyricist Green, who attended.

"Seeing it there in a bare-bones production, a very respectful production—I don't mean respectful in a boring way, but very attentive to every lyric and every musical reference, which is every writer's dream—and seeing it intelligently done and well played, sitting in a full audience laughing with the material, really reclaimed the show for us," says Green, who also recently trekked to St. Louis to see New Line's regional premiere of *Hands on a Hardbody*, for which she provided lyrics.

Though composer Kitt didn't make the pilgrimage, he followed the show's fortunes admiringly from afar.

"Having someone come forward and say, 'I love it and want to do it' was really important to the show," confirms Kitt, who went on to write *Next to Normal* (seen at New Line in 2013) and the current Broadway outing *If/Then*.

"And not only did Scott Miller do it—he did a production that was unanimously praised in St. Louis. The conversation changes when you have a major critic like Judith Newmark [of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*] go to bat for a show, and I know that led to a number of other productions, to people contacting us through Scott."

Survey today's new-musical makers, and you'll find that many have a similar New Line story: about how Miller secured the rights to their show not long after its initial run, auspicious or otherwise, and ended



Miller



ALL PHOTOS BY JILL RITTER LINDBERG

Opposite page: left, Eeyan Richardson and Taylor Pietz in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; an amorous pile-on from *High Fidelity*. This page: clockwise from top, the cast of *Hands on a Hardbody*; Pietz and Philip Leveling in *Love Kills*; Jeffrey M. Wright, Kimi Short and Mary Beth Black in *Next to Normal*.

up staging a production that found a receptive, even ecstatic audience in St. Louis, a town with no shortage of musical-theatre options (touring shows stop downtown at the Fox, while the huge outdoor venue Muny stages no fewer than seven full-scale tuners each summer).

Cry-Baby, another Broadway show with an abortive run, got a clarifying, stripped-down New Line remount in 2012 that its creators credit with momentum for the show (an original cast album is still in the works). Other highlights include *Bukowsical*, a gritty jazz musical about grizzled author Charles Bukowski that had played previously at Los Angeles's tiny Sacred Fools Theatre and at the New York International Fringe Festival; *Bat Boy* and *Reefer Madness*, two cult musicals that also had their start in small L.A. venues, followed by disappointing runs Off-Broadway; *Love Kills*, Kyle Jarrow's stark telling of the Starkweather/Fugate murder spree, which had only previously had a run at the New York Musical Theatre Festival; *Passing Strange*, which was a critical but not a commercial success on Broadway, and which New Line nabbed for its second regional production (after Washington, D.C.'s Studio Theatre).

Indeed, the list of nontraditional musicals that New Line has

staged is both impressively comprehensive and quirkily eclectic: familiar pop-tuner titles like *Hair*, *Grease* and *The Rocky Horror Show*, but also *bare*, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, *Urinetown*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and, only just recently, the arguable starting gun of the current wave of pop/rock musicals, *Rent*. Miller is also a champion of late-period Sondheim (*Assassins*, *Passion*, *Into the Woods*) and he's staged a few emblematic works by the serious-new-musical writers (Jason Robert Brown's *Songs for a New World*, Adam Guettel's *Floyd Collins*, Andrew Lippa's *The Wild Party*).

The 2014–15 New Line season is typically risky and singular: Miller will stage two St. Louis premieres—Frank Wildhorn's not-quite-a-Broadway-hit *Bonnie & Clyde*, then Richard Thomas's brilliantly crass *Jerry Springer the Opera*—and close next spring with a revival of *The Threepenny Opera*.

There are edgier theatre companies in the U.S., but it would be hard to find a musicals-only company with programming as consistently provocative or as reluctant to proffer theatrical comfort food. You'll probably never see *The Music Man* at New Line, in other words.

IN PERSON, MILLER—A MILD-mannered, bespectacled 50-year-old with yellow-blond hair that gives him an agreeably nerdy, Simpsons-esque look—is no Harold Hill,

though he does suggest another very recognizable type: the effusive, obsessive, opinionated musical theatre superfan (“I looooooove that show” is not an exaggerated transcription of a typical Miller quote, though it hardly captures the many registers that his “love” warbles through). But instead of simply trading bootleg recordings and arguing online about which musicals were ruined out of town, like the show queens we know (or are), Miller is actually staging his dream projects and writing books about them.

Not all his productions are home runs—his paid but non-Equity casts appear to run the gamut from rising talents to spirited amateurs; and he stages each show for just 12 performances over four weeks, though he rehearses for as many as six or seven weeks (all the better for “digging down deep inside” the material he directs, he says). But by staging contemporary musicals of wildly varying styles and pedigrees, with attention to detail but minus needless frills in an intimate setting, and by advocating for them tirelessly, even quixotically, Miller is, in his quietly ornery Midwestern way, advancing and reifying the American musical-theatre form as it has come kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

“He’s an anarchist, and I applaud him, out there waving his protest sign,” says Amanda Green.

Miller was raised in St. Louis on a standard diet of cast albums and school theatre productions. Then he went to Harvard, which had no theatre program, and where the joke about the music program is “that music was meant to be seen and not heard there, because it was all musicologists.” Miller did his share of this kind of study, with a self-directed focus on musical theatre, but he also, much like other Harvard grads—Peter Sellars, Bill Rauch—took full advantage of the “Wild West” atmosphere that the absence of a formal theatre program inspired.



“There were 35, 40 productions going up every semester in every imaginable space, everything from *Antigone* to *Dames at Sea*, and it was wild and awesome,” Miller says over lunch before a closing-weekend performance of *Rent*. He wrote and staged his own shows at Harvard and music-directed *Pippin*.

After college, his former high school theatre instructor called and asked him to help start a community theatre in St. Louis, so Miller returned to his hometown and helped run the CenterStage Theatre Company for a number of years. But he eventually chafed at the theatre’s relatively staid programming.

“CenterStage did *Best Little Whorehouse* and *How to Succeed*, which were awesome, but they didn’t wanna do the kind of stuff I wanted to do—they didn’t wanna do *Assassins*,” Miller recalls. That pitch-black Sondheim show was accordingly among the first non-original, non-revue musicals staged by the new company Miller founded in 1991. What’s interesting about New Line’s early years is that the kind of musical the company has become identified with—essentially, shows stocked with varying proportions of the ingredients Miller celebrated in his 2011 book *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals*—was not thick on the ground in the early ’90s. At the time, the form was still in a post-’80s, post-British-megamusical doldrums. When *Rent* came along in 1996, the new American musical got its biggest youthful shot in the arm since *Hair*. In the ensuing decades, and especially in the years since 2006’s *Spring Awakening*, the number of rock musicals—and, more important, musicals with a distinctly post-Rodgers & Hammerstein moral sensibility—has grown to the point that Miller’s wish list is longer than a Cole Porter patter song.

It almost seems, in retrospect, that Miller built his theatre in anticipation of the flood to come, though that ascribes to him prophetic powers not even he would claim. In any case, he and his tiny theatre were ideally positioned for what he now routinely calls—in gleeful defiance of the received wisdom that the American musical

reached its acme in the years between *Oklahoma!* in 1943 and *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964—the musical’s new “Golden Age.”

As he put it in a blog post last year, “I feel like the art form is stretching itself even more than it has before, maybe reaching its highest level yet...I don’t think we’ve had a period this fertile and this eclectic since the late ’60s and early ’70s...The musical is on fire right now. And it shows no signs of slowing down.”

Laurence O’Keefe, the composer and lyricist of *Bat Boy*—who ventured onto Broadway with *Legally Blonde* and is currently represented Off Broadway by *Heathers*, co-written with *Reefer Madness*’s Kevin Murphy—counts himself impressed by Miller’s enthusiasm



Left: Joel Hackbarth, Kimi Short, Zachary Allen Farmer, Chrissy Young as Frances and Marcy Wiegert in *Bukowskical*. Right: Jeremy Hyatt, Anna Skidis, Luke Steingrubby and Marshall Jennings in *Rent*.

and dedication, and recounts a spirited back-and-forth with Miller about which version of *Bat Boy*’s score to use at New Line (“When people ask, I always say: Use the London version,” says O’Keefe). But when asked about Miller’s “Golden Age” claim, O’Keefe gives a potted history of the American musical from the Jazz Age to the MTV era and beyond before concluding, “We are definitely in at least a Gilded Age, and maybe we are in a Golden Age. Producers are starting to remember that they have to delight the audience. Shows like *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *In the Heights*, *Avenue Q*—those shows are delightful, and they’re as good as anything from the ’50s.”

Pointing to another sign of the form’s health, Miller says, “I love how many rock and pop artists want to write a musical—I don’t think a lot of ’em are great, but *some* of ’em are great.”

AMONG THOSE, IN MILLER’S RATHER LONELY ESTIMATION, is *Cry-Baby*, a stage version of the John Waters film with music by Fountains of Wayne’s lead songwriter, Adam Schlesinger, and lyrics by “Daily Show” writer David Javerbaum. The Broadway production, widely perceived as a craven attempt to fashion another *Hairspray*, closed after just a few months in 2008. Miller feels that the show, essentially a campy shotgun wedding of *Grease* and *West Side Story*, was overblown and misdirected on Broadway. Though Javerbaum and Schlesinger don’t entirely agree, they did jump at the chance the New Line production gave them to fix one thing. New Line’s house band maxes out at six players—and that was just fine with *Cry-Baby*’s songwriters.

“I thought the Broadway orchestra was too big for what is

essentially a rockabilly show, although we had no choice because of the house minimum rules,” says Schlesinger, who with Javerbaum paid to have new six-piece arrangements made of the score for the New Line production; those arrangements are now the basis of tracks for the show’s long-overdue cast album. Schlesinger also traveled to St. Louis to see New Line’s production and reports, “It was great, and it showed us that *Cry-Baby* can work as a smaller production

of them not yet officially licensed: The scripts and scores are seldom in pristine, ready-to-disseminate condition. Quips Porter, “Some of these scripts have hand-written notes from the oboe player in the margins. With shows that closed quickly, it’s like everybody put their scripts down and walked away and said, ‘Somebody can use this.’”

That’s required some agile improvisation, says music director Smolik. The final six-piece rearrangements of the *Cry-Baby* score, he recalls, “weren’t delivered via Dropbox until the last week of tech rehearsal and two days before our first preview—it was nerve-wracking, to say the least.”

Such are the sacrifices, material and procedural, of gambling on non-commercial musicals on a shoestring budget in an urban center that’s not New York. If this is a Golden Age, at New Line it’s being done on the cheap. Miller is pulling off the feat, according to Newmark, of “demonstrating that you can draw an audience in the Middle West with the kind of work that makes you think, ‘Only in New York.’”

AN AUDIENCE OF NEARLY ALL ages, apart from young children, crowds into the auditorium for the closing weekend of *Rent*. It’s a show Miller had resisted staging till this year because he



JILL SUTTER LINDNER/TLC

Ryan Foizey (center) and the cast of *Cry-Baby*.

and with a smaller band. In fact, that’s how I hope it is done in any future productions.”

Small can indeed be better, and not only for the rock shows. The theatre’s current venue, a 210-seat auditorium near the campus of Washington University, is just the latest in a series of cozy spaces New Line has called home, recalls the *Post-Dispatch*’s Judith Newmark.

“Scott makes a big advantage of intimacy,” says Newmark, who in March helped ensure that the St. Louis Theater Circle Awards gave Miller a special award for his body of work. “I remember *Sweeney Todd* in a church basement so small that when the sailor was singing to Johanna, I could have touched him. And when you bring these shows down to that scale, it changes all the proportions—changes your relationship to the story, to the characters, to the music.”

The relationship that Miller has forged over time with an informal repertory of performers, and more crucially with his audience, is also one that sets his theatre apart, Newmark says.

“When he does a show like *Hair* or *Bat Boy*, you have a feeling of the cult spreading from the stage into the audience,” Newmark says. “We’re not just seeing *Bat Boy*—we’re seeing Scott’s *Bat Boy*.”

Miller’s personality isn’t just stamped all over New Line: He is the theatre’s only full-time staff member, and, judging from the car he drives, most of the theatre’s annual \$100,000 budget is poured into New Line’s three annual productions. In addition to his informal repertory acting company and various assistant directors, he had, until recently, the versatile Justin Smolik as resident music director (Smolik left for another job). Lest this sound like a seat-of-the-pants, Mickey-and-Judy-level enterprise, Sarah Porter, resident costumer and frequent performer—she recently starred as *Maureen* in *Rent*—hails the company’s “level of organization and respect for people working there. It makes it a great home.”

Organization comes in handy when faced with one easy-to-overlook challenge presented by staging brand-new musicals, some

felt the original New York production “was so exactly right, so perfect, why would I change anything?” When he saw the Off-Broadway revival in 2011, also directed by the original director Michael Greif, “I loved it every bit as much, and it was totally different. Walking out of that theatre that night, I was like, ‘I can work on this. I’m not handcuffed anymore.’ They freed me from the original production.”

Miller’s *Rent* is youthful, movingly raw, and unfailingly intimate; it doesn’t smooth over the original work’s odd, form-bending structure. It feels almost as if it’s being made up on the spot, and that gives it a kind of immediacy it probably hasn’t had much since its debut at Off-Broadway’s New York Theatre Workshop.

“I hated *Rent* the first time I saw it, but I loved this production,” raves Newmark. “It really did change my mind about the show.”

That’s a story many can tell about Miller and his unlikely theatre. You might say he’s in the business of changing people’s minds: about shows they thought they hated, about subjects they didn’t think could be sung about, about the musical form itself. The key to Miller’s success may be that—for all the ego necessarily involved in running a theatre and writing several books and blog posts expounding your point of view—what has guided him above all is his willingness to have his own mind changed, even occasionally blown.

“My experience over the years has been that if I don’t understand something in the script, if it doesn’t feel like it works, it’s probably my fault—it’s probably not the script’s fault,” Miller says. “I think a lot of directors won’t take that. If something doesn’t make sense, they change it. Well, it’s probably ‘cause you don’t get it.”

Now that’s some high fidelity. ☒

CHECK OUT
AMERICAN THEATRE ONLINE
www.tcg.org/americantheatre