

Interview with *Noir* Writers

Kyle Jarrow and Duncan Sheik

Prior to the start of rehearsals, Literary Manager Lily Wolff hopped on Zoom with the creators of *Noir* to discuss their process, inspiration, and what we should be adding to our Netflix queues.

Lily Wolff: We do a lot of new plays at the Alley so our audience is getting pretty well versed in what that process is and how it differs from writer to writer, but I have to imagine creating a new musical is a little different. What does that collaboration process look like? How do you two do it?

Duncan Sheik: When I first started on *Spring Awakening*, I was just a guy who was making records and touring as a singer/songwriter, so there was this huge adjustment of having to be part of the collaborative process. All of sudden I went from being somebody in a van with three other guys and we're gonna play a show, and there might be some lights at the club, but that's it. Doesn't get much more boring than that. I think having incredible lighting designers, costumes, a great story, and choreography is such a boon. As hard as it to make it all work together, when it does, it's a very magical art form.

Kyle Jarrow: I agree with all that. I think process-wise, it is just as varied, probably, as new straight plays are. I would say the biggest difference though is that time is just so valuable because there are so many more moving parts in a musical. There's music, text, choreography, also often more involved tech elements – new musicals tend to run out of time.

DS: That is a real problem – figuring out how to put all the elements together. The other issue with time is that there has to be such compression within the show itself because you've got all this music, all this choreography, all the technical elements, and you're trying to tell this story in the space of two



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hours and, hopefully, not too much more than that.

LW: What about between the two of you? What is your rhythm? You've worked together on two projects now. Was it fairly consistent or has your process evolved?

KJ: Lyrics are a collaborative thing. Where the first drafts come from kinda switches up between us. But then usually after that, Duncan is the song/music department and I'm script. We weigh-in on each other's work and share ideas. There's something really nice about working with someone who I just completely trust is going to make something wonderful.

DS: Not to blow smoke, but Kyle's a really great musician, as well, so I know that his musical instincts, at the very least, are going to come from an intelligent, thoughtful place. I'm happy to hear Kyle's thoughts. And conversely, especially with this show, I had a lot of thoughts about the twists and turns of how the story might go. It's a complicated plot.

LW: Which comes first? Is it story or music?

KJ: In this case, it was story. I did an outline with song spotting, essentially. Then Duncan writes the songs, and then I wrote the first act of the script when there were like five songs and things sort of developed simultaneously from there.

DS: With the exception of "The Sun Shines Brighter in L.A.," you pretty much gave me a finished lyric.

KJ: Yeah, I think that's true – or the idea of what the main metaphor would be.

DS: There were songs and there was a sense of the arc of the show, and then the scene writing happened later.

KJ: It's not just that the story influences the song. After it gets written, I'll often go back in and say, "I gotta set up that song better," just because it feels different, or the lyrics do a slightly different thing than we had initially thought. It's not like one thing gets finished and then the other thing gets written. There's a conversation in between. When you go to see musicals, you can tell when that conversation wasn't happening because the songs are great, but they feel completely out of sync with the story or vice-versa.

DS: Yeah, my personal feeling is that musicals live or die by the book, by the story the book is telling. I mean, there are plenty of musicals that have some really nice music in them, but because the book is such a...mishegoss... it just doesn't work. (Laughs). No, I'm serious! The memorable things are the songs, that's the headline, you know - the music - but the truth is what makes a musical work is the book.

KJ: One thing that has changed a decent amount with this show, is actually the order of the songs. And I think that's not uncommon, at least for my process, because like I said, you can write lyrics and have a feeling of what the song could be, and then Duncan takes it and the song that comes out is always so much better than my weird, vague imagining.

Sometimes it's a different tempo or a different vibe. You know, part of a show is the pacing of the songs. It's like an album to a certain extent. You can't have four slow songs in a row. Like, the song that opens the second act, it's called "The Sweet Ache of Loneliness," originally it was the first song in the show. Duncan wrote this beautiful ballad, but when I heard it, I was like, you can't start a show with this. It's just too slow. You can start a second act with it... What an awesome revelation. The show is stronger for it.

LW: And does that de facto impact the storytelling beats?

DS: I'm notorious for not needing the songs to do storytelling work, necessarily. I mean, it's fine if it does. But, it's more interesting, for me, if it's intensifying the emotional moment in some way and therefore there's a little more of a modular quality about the songs in the shows that I work on - mostly.

KJ: I think that's true. I also think, there were some songs that couldn't move because they were so tied to story. And I think with the second act, in particular, that was the case. But the other thing is, it's a story told by one of the characters, and there are some jumps in time, so the story itself is slightly modular in that jumping back in time could happen here, but you could also move that chunk later and it doesn't necessarily change the overall story. We have a little bit of wiggle room, which is not true of all shows.

DS: Yeah, and that's the great thing about having an unreliable narrator. He can sort of tell the story in any way he wants.

LW: What was the process of immersing yourself in the film noir genre? And is this a straight up portrayal of the genre or is there something more going on?

KJ: I was already a real lover of the genre. In particular, later noir. *Vertigo*, *Chinatown*, a lot of later Hitchcock stuff -

DS: *Rear Window*.

KJ: - and often set in L.A., a lot of these, which this show is as well.

DS: That short story, "The Day of the Locust" by Nathaniel West. I always felt like this show is a child of the sort of L.A. noir/Nathaniel West world. But, just a much more contemporary version. I like all these much more modern noirs, whether it's European ones like *Betty Blue*, or things like *Drive*, or *Usual Suspects* - I don't know if you'd exactly call that noir - but that was a movie where the plot really works in a great way with a great payoff.

KJ: There's also *Double Indemnity*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Mulholland Drive*. *Gilda*. That's an old-school one, but that's one that I really love. It's a vast genre. And *Drive* is a good example, because when you ask, are we just doing the genre or are we trying to do a twist on it? I would say the music definitely lives in a neo-noir place. It is definitely not period 1940's/50's music, but there are some flourishes, especially in the string arrangements, of that period. Like a lot of these neo-noir movies where there are gestures toward that classic noir era, but it's clearly existing outside of that time. I think the music does that very clearly.

DS: Where I was coming from, specifically, with that is the way that Vangelis did *Blade Runner* - did this sort of noir score but with electronic music. So that, to me, was the sort of sweet spot of using electronic music but having it function in that way of regret and sadness and human suffering.

KJ: I also think that one thing theatre lets you do, that film doesn't usually, is that you can exist slightly outside of historical period. I don't think it plays as a period piece, but it doesn't feel 100% like it's happening today. It's happening in between.

LW: In working on this piece, is there anything the project has revealed to you about the genre that maybe you didn't realize before? Any discoveries?

KJ: I think that there is a complexity of human psychology that the genre is comfortable with that a lot of other genres aren't. And that's definitely

something that I started feeling the more I was writing. I think it's a genre that's comfortable with people that are both good and bad. Like real people! But I think a lot of genres aren't really. There are good guys and there are bad guys. Particularly in musical theatre, there are often very simple psychologies in characters. Actually, I will say, I think *Spring Awakening* is one of the few musical theatre pieces that does go there. And to me that's really interesting storytelling, but it's something that musical theatre doesn't always do. And I think noir as a genre has always been about digging into these complicated psychologies that people have. No one is fully bad, no one is fully good, people can mean well but do horrible things . . .

DS: There's certainly not a hero and villain, or a protagonist and an antagonist, you know, there's all these morally compromised people. But they're not morally compromised because they're immoral, it's just that circumstances have put them into a position where they're having to make decisions and they don't always make the right one. And to me, that's what's really fun about it - the sort of amoral quality of it. Because, then you're rooting for somebody but you know they're maybe not the best human being around... there's something really true to human nature about that.

LW: If you could speak directly to your audience right now, to the person reading this playbill who is about to see your show, is there anything that you would want to say to them?

DS: "Pay attention and don't believe everything you see - and there will be great rewards!"

Read the full interview at alleytheatre.org/noirinterview

