

J.D. SCRIMGEOUR: A POET WRITES A MUSICAL

I didn't discover musical theater until my sons did. My parents didn't take me to musicals when I was a child, and my exposure to them through most of my adulthood was limited. While I gradually found my way into writing, I came by way of sports more than the arts—I've probably written more poems about basketball than anyone.

But when my younger son, Guthrie, got interested in musical theater, I did, too. Over the last decade, I've taken in a lot of shows. Perhaps because I came to the genre late, I wasn't jaded by it. It seemed full of possibilities, especially comic campy possibilities; Also, because I wasn't accustomed to it, it seemed, well, weird. People, in unison, bursting into song? A dramatic moment immediately followed by flamboyant dancing? What the hell?

And so, in collaboration with my sons, who are both musically inclined, I took a little break from writing poetry and nonfiction and wrote a musical, ***Only Human***, which will be premiering June 26-29 at the Ames Hall Theatre in Salem, Massachusetts. Working in a new genre has led me to reflect on my "old" genre: poetry. Here are a few musings:

1. Writing the musical, particularly at first, was pure pleasure. I was writing to entertain myself and others. Ideally, I want the experience of writing poetry to be similar, but too often I get stuck trying to impress some imaginary reader (Robert Pinsky? My teachers from graduate school? My friends? Elizabeth Bishop?). Is this smart enough? Difficult enough? Yes, there's a rigor, a discipline, to writing poetry, but there must always be pleasure—an abandonment to joy in the act of making.
1. Writing the musical was something risky because it was something so new. Part of what was exciting about this musical, especially once it seemed like it would get staged, was the fact that it could—it still could!—be a disaster. While the early drafts were motivated solely by pleasure, my revisions had the urgency and intensity of any risky act. And, while those rewrites were nerve-racking (What the hell am I doing? Why do I think I can do this?), the experience has been thrilling, too, like competing in a high-stakes sporting event.

How does this relate to writing poetry? It's a bit of a stretch, but I'm reminded of the writer David

Shields' comment that once he knows what genre a work is that he's reading, he starts to lose interest. The risk of writing a musical made more visible what I don't like in a lot of poetry—mine or others: the fact that it is a genre, and that once, as a writer, you accept that genre, you are mitigating risk, limiting what can happen next. Writing in a different genre made me aware of how much I chafe working in—or reading—the genre of poetry (and “experimental” and “conceptual” poetries have, in my eyes, as many tiresome expectations as more traditional verse). The concept of “poetry” is a means toward making a good piece of writing, but it is not an end in itself; the ultimate goal is not to write a poem, but to write something that makes you and others think and feel. Taking risks, resisting boundaries, should be part of any good writing.

1. Writing the musical reminded me of the beauty of logic, the thrill of clicking scenes and characters together, finding the proper words for one moment to set up another. I have a mathematical mind, and figuring out the musical was like doing an engrossingly challenging Sudoku. This experience made me realize that what I value in reading and writing poetry is something very different than logic: surprise. Sure, writers of all genres, and perhaps especially poetry, might say that their writing requires similar mathematical attentiveness—think of poetry's obsession with form—but for me, so much of the pleasure of poetry is the surprise of it, a different kind of surprise than that of a well-constructed play. What I value most in poetry are the juxtapositions, the leaps of thought, the way an image or feeling or idea is made to connect to some other image or feeling or idea in an original way. Yes, I'm getting at something similar to Ben Jonson's famous line about John Donne: “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” That “violence” needn't be logical (is violence logical?), as much as it fulfills the poet's need, or personal, passionate vision.
2. Finally, there was the thrill of collaboration! How remarkable it has been to work not only with my sons, but with director Peter Sampieri, music director Karen Gahagan, choreographer Meaghan Noel, as well as the incredibly talented cast. This makes me want to make more art (including poetry) collaboratively, and to experience others' work that is collaborative.

How can I live with all the contradictions in the above observations? That's simple: I'll keep writing about them, keep writing through them, mixing prose and song, dialogue and verse; and I'll try not to do it alone.



J.D. Scrimgeour is Coordinator of Creative Writing at Salem State University. His two poetry collections are *Territories* and *The Last Miles*. He's also the author of two books of creative nonfiction, *Spin Moves* and *Themes For English B: A Professor's Education In and Out of Class*, the latter which won the AWP Award for Nonfiction. With musician Philip Swanson he formed the performance group, **Confluence**, and released a CD of poetry and music, *Ogunquit & Other Works*.