



Mass Poetry

EVENTS | OUTREACH | MASSPOETRY.ORG

- ABOUT
- FESTIVAL
- PROGRAMS
- ARTICLES
- EVENTS
- RESOURCES
- FRIENDS

The following is Mark Schorr’s review of the musical “Only Human” with script by J.D. Scrimgeour and music by Aidan and Guthrie Scrimgeour. See J.D.’s earlier essay “A Poet Writes a Musical.”

POETIC CROSSOVER

by poet Mark Schorr

Oh, happy pair!
Oh, happy we!
It’s very rare
How we agree.
— Richard Wilbur’s lyrics for
Leonard Bernstein’s music in *Candide*



At their best, the lyrics of American musical theater form a rare *agreement* with the music by making a special kind of crossover from idea to poetry to music. If that crossover happens, there

is a magical effect that transforms all of the above into musical theater. Stephen Sondheim gives us insight into the process in his brilliant book of annotated lyrics, *Look, I Made A Hat*. Before you turn to the first page, you see his process emblazoned on the end papers. Less is More. Content dictates Form. God is in the Details. For example, *Sundays in the Park with George* did not just happen. The idea of George Seurat as a character looking at his own painting had to be found before the music and words could be put into action to create a lasting piece of musical theater.

Now poet J.D. Scrimgeour in collaboration with his sons Aidan and Guthrie Scrimgeour have given us another example of this poetic crossover, right at Salem State University. The play is *Only Human*, a fable about the people in Blump, a slaughterhouse town somewhere in middle America. Blump's main feature is "an awful sound" every time an animal is killed.

We've seen this fable before, from LaFontaine to *Animal Farm*, but what distinguishes the poetry of this particular version is a cast that convinces us of its particular reality. Every cast member has an animal identity given in the program notes.

Under the skilled direction of Peter Sampieri, *Only Human* seethes with collegiate energy. David Meredith as Claudio, Kayla Riley as Patience, Claudio's mother, Elizabeth Jelinek as Estelle, Claudio's old flame, Andy LeBlanc as Gobble, the Mayor of Blump, and James Wechsler who doubles as Lip the town's simpleton, and as Kudzu, a citizen. Because of Sampieri's strong direction, the entire cast is friendly, downright lovable, and every cast member gets lines and a piece of the action.

And the poetry of lyrics— almost every song— helps that energy to get realized.

The lyrics invite cast members to cross over the fences that hold them — out of the small back yards in their small, slaughterhouse town. They confront the awful sound of Blump. Like the characters in other American musicals, they find "a new way of living."

In an early number that introduces the cast, "Hop the Fence," they energetically sing "Take a good running start/make a leap." Even by that time, the audience is with them, wondering where will this fence-jumping take them. When the main character, Claudio, a movie star who has returned to his home town, sings his inner thoughts in "Across the Sea," poetry preserves the

light tone in this number and throughout the first act. In the next number, “Big Pig,” led by their mayor Gobble, a witty series of pig jokes in rapid succession not only creates laughs, but also sets up some of the sardonic realities. For example, in the numbers “He’s a Pig,” followed by “Into the Chute,” the cast confronts the realities of existence in a slaughterhouse town.

The numbers that follow, like “The Old Man Jig” and “Estelle, Estelle,” present fascinating lyrics that set up melodic loops and counterpoints. We notice how each song effectively builds on the previous songs. Some numbers draw upon the rich sources of blues and gospel in settings that also heighten the words. Kudos to Aidan Scrimgeour who wrote the music in collaboration with his brother Guthrie Scrimgeour.

By the end of the first act, the play has cast its spell and the audience identifies with the cast’s dilemma:

No nothing is all

that it seems

And the answers are equally haunting:

Do you love me?

but only in dreams

Even as the plots, characters, and sets of poetic drama fade like dreams, the strong lyrics and music must remain with us. Bertolt Brecht called it a *Verfremdungseffekt*— which I translate as the audience’s distance from the subject. The poet and director have to give us perspective on the situation or we would be left with nothing more than an entertaining cloud of pig jokes and puns. In providing such a thoughtful message and a larger view— the poetic drama of Scrimgeour and Sampieri also succeeds.

As if to prove this point, by the end of Act II my program was covered with hasty transcriptions of these bits of poetry in lyrics:

What do you

When you see the end

What can you do?

All stories, all lies

Pretending we're humans

We're all animals

Going into the chute.

There's something beautiful

About a funeral

Men not laughing

Women not trying to allure.

Why is this poetic crossover so effective? The melodic loopings and counterpoints of poet J.D. Scrimgeour's words have a lot to do with it. It seems to me that each song finds its proper form — many intricate but accessible variations on rhymed couplets — and that's what makes them memorable. That is why more of us learn the words to our musical comedies than to our epics or even our short lyrics. But in this case the music and lyrics are so closely intertwined, that many of us will be learning and singing these lyrics long after *Only Human's* first run in Salem, Massachusetts.



Mark Schorr, the Director Emeritus of the Robert Frost Foundation, has produced Ben Mazer's verse play, *A City of Angels*, at the Grolier Poetry Book Shop and has opened for Jim Vrabel's one-man show of John Berryman with dream songs from Schorr's second collection, *Recovery* (2011) in a poets' theater production.

© Mass Poetry 2014

POWERED BY SQUARESPACE