

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN DAGGETT, CATHERINE FILLoux, AND JIMMY ROBERTS

*Words make you think a thought.
Music makes you feel a feeling.
A song makes you feel a thought.*

E. Y. Harburg

Later this month, the musical, *Welcome to the Big Dipper*, will have its New York City Off-Broadway premiere at The York Theatre. The musical is based on the play, *All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go*, written by playwright and librettist Catherine Filloux, who was a Guest Artist at Iowa's New Play Festival in May of 2023. Please find information here for the production opening November 26 and running through the end of 2024:

<https://yorktheatre.org/on-stage/big-dipper>.

I recently met with Catherine (book) and her collaborators, John Daggett, (book and additional lyrics), and composer/lyricist, Jimmy Roberts to discuss their new project.

CW: So, talk to me. I've heard about this play since I worked with Catherine and John, 18, 17 years ago on Lemkin's House.

JD: Lemkin's House was 2006, I think.

CF: No, we hadn't been working on it at that time.

CW: Okay. Do you all want to give a brief introduction about who you are and then how this all came to pass. Ladies first.

CF: Can I pass to the composer because the composer goes first. Maestro...

JR: We met around 2011, but we had known each other for many years before that. It stems back from the musical I was involved in, *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*. John was in an earlier version of that...a non-singing version of it at first. Somehow, I became connected with the writer of that show, Joe DiPietro, and through that I met John and Cat.

As far as this musical, they approached me with the idea of setting a play of Cat's called *All Dressed and Nowhere to Go* to music; making it a musical. It was already a play based on an actual incident that you'll hear more about that that happened in Buffalo, New York. So, I agreed, and the rest is like the history of any musical. It's long and tortured, and circuitous.

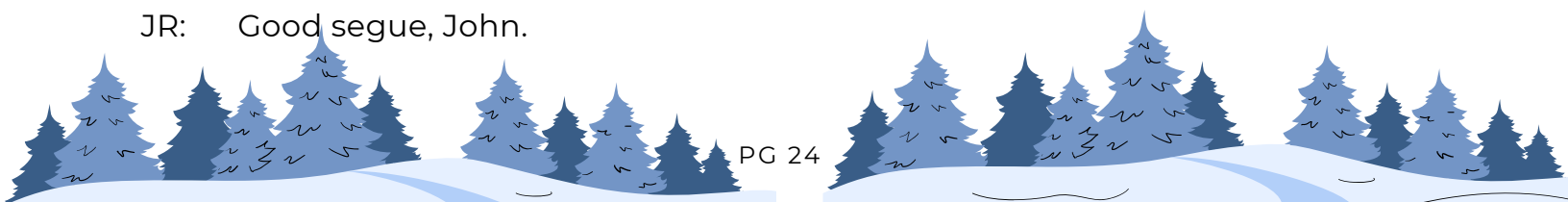
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JR (cont.): We met around 2011, but we had known each other for many years. As far as this musical, they approached me with the idea of setting a play of Cat's called All Dressed and Nowhere to Go to music; making it a musical. It was already a play based on an actual incident that you'll hear more about that that happened in Buffalo, New York. So, I agreed, and the rest is like the history of any musical. It's long and tortured, and circuitous. It was honed and developed, and it became an act of discovery to find out just what it was we were writing actually. And we're at that point. Others seem to agree. It's been presented in other cities as a kind of a workshop, and I've been doing the music and the lyrics. I'm a composer, a poet, and the main thing is the art of collaboration, which is the three of us. It becomes the art of collaboration with everybody else who gets involved too. Our director. And eventually our actors and as they say, even the audience becomes a collaborator. We're going to need them for our previews and even the management of the theater in collaborating with them. It's all a little insane actually. You're dealing with theater people. Egos. Sensitivities. You have to navigate all of that, and any show would have a story similar to ours. And here we are though. Very proud that we're being presented by a very prestigious Off-Broadway theater, The York Theatre, which incubates new musicals; that's its mission for the past 50 years. It's located...an unusual place, not the Theater District... the Upper East Side; East 76th and Lexington. It's in a church. It's a nice space; this current place. It seats about 200. And we're excited about our set, which is kind of an inn in Upstate New York and the unusual people that will populate our stage for the three days that they are there...in our story. I hope that entices you and anybody hearing it to find out what happens.

CW: I remember hearing about your play, Catherine, All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go. I've not read it. And I did not realize that it [the musical] is sort of an adaptation of a "straight" play. I'm eager to hear about the actual incident that occurred if you're willing to share that. Thank you, Jimmy. I'm very intrigued. But to your point though about collaboration...well, that's what theater is. It brings together disparate groups of people who all have their idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and then you become this one big, dysfunctional family for a certain length of time.

JD: ...Which is exactly what the musical is about.

JR: Good segue, John.



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JD: I'll let Catherine tell the story of the actual incident, but I'll say that, as you know Connie, I have multiple sclerosis. And as I became more and more disabled, I'm gonna say about 2008, maybe, Cat, or 2009, I asked Catherine if I could...because I really liked the play...If I could take the show and attempt to write a musical about it because I was kind of a bad Rock n' Roll musician as a young man. And she said I could do that. She allowed me to do that, and I took a shot at that. And I discovered I was a much worse composer and lyricist than I thought I was. And that's about the time that we approached Jimmy to come and be our savior with the musical portions of it. Because I wanted to continue to do something creative as my illness took away my acting. And that's kind of the genesis of that. Now, I'll pass it to Cat.

CF: Yes, so as...I'm thinking of a confluence of water, bodies of water, and how they all came together. To start with, I desperately wanted to have the opportunity to work with Jimmy. I recall going to lunch at the French Roast on 85th Street and Broadway to try and woo him into maybe even...starting to think maybe he could work with me. I'm a librettist as well as a playwright, who, as you know, writes about human rights. I feared that my topics, which are somewhat... maybe dark...might not be...lend themselves to musicals. So, there was that, and then there was...that's why I say "confluence." John having said All Dressed Up would make a good musical, and me kind of thinking, "Perhaps."

All Dressed Up had its premiere in your hometown, Connie. It was done in Baltimore; oddly enough. That's where it originated. It was a story that came from my mother and sister having come to Buffalo to see one of my plays; checking into a Travelodge in the cold climate and telling me that they had heard from the manager, who was somewhat beleaguered that there was a group of Amish and a group of cross dressers in the Travelodge. He "organizationally" had decided to sandwich the Amish in between the cross dressers to keep the noise level down. So, they reported that to me and I...I'm sure...John was nodding his head because he was in the play in Buffalo...

JD: And the next morning, I forget where we were eating, but this was described over the breakfast table. And I saw...I saw lightbulbs form over Catherine's head. That's all I can say.

CF: So, off we went on that journey, which has become even more glorious once Jimmy...took his time, but with time acquiesced to becoming the captain of the ship. Of this venture, which is now called Welcome to the Big Dipper.



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Then, I will skip forward like one does in a fast forward film, where many, many, many, many things happened and much, much work was done to our musical, which is a collaboration, where along the way, one of the things we realized (that I think is very profound), the way we were going to excel...we needed to work as a team all the time. I am only half of the book writer, John is the other half, and John has assisted additional lyrics to Jimmy, who is the lyricist. And together, this triumvirate has worked to create this musical. And having been primarily a playwright, and then also a librettist for opera, I believe I can say that writing a musical is the most difficult that I've ever done.

CW: Where in Baltimore did All Dressed Up premier?

CF: It was at a theater that was a brand-new theater...

JD: Actors Theater of Baltimore. It's defunct now.

CF: And the man, who read the play wanted to produce it, he also sent me a picture of a gutted-out construction site and said, "This is the theater." So clearly, they were starting from scratch.

CW: And what year was that, Catherine?

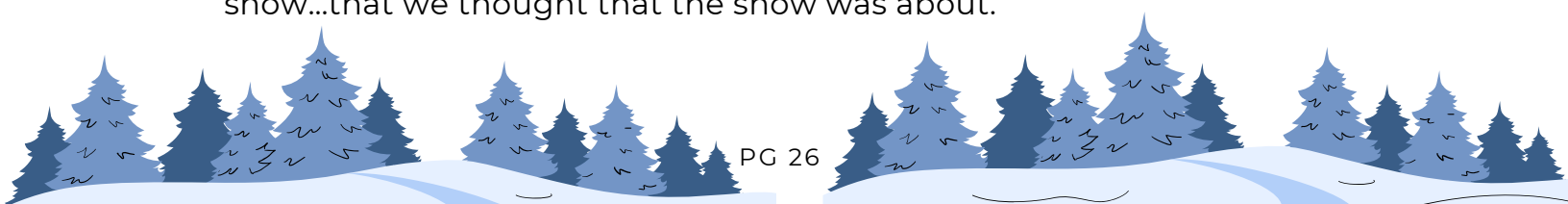
CF: I think that was in the 1990s.

CW: And you all officially began working this piece...collaborating...in 2011?

CF: Correct.

JD: Well, I had started...I had asked her if I could try adapting it to a musical a bit a bit earlier than that. It was obvious that we needed the genius of Jimmy to push it through to where it needed to be. It's an amazing thing to work on a musical because sometimes it takes over and tells you what it wants to be. It's its own animal. I had written a version that was very close to Catherine's story. And as Jimmy came in, he made a valiant attempt to try and take what I had written and make it work. And it just became...it screamed that it didn't want to work. And we "killed our children." Is that the appropriate term, Jimmy?

JR: Yeah, we murdered our loved ones...for the things that were dearest to us in show...that we thought that the show was about.



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- JD: Every song that's actually in the musical now has probably at least three, if not more versions of what it was before the realization of where it's at now. There are probably different versions of the whole story, so to speak. At least three or four to get it where it is now. Because you try and you die.
- JR: One of the great examples of other shows is *West Side Story*. The original concept was called *East Side Story*. And it had nothing to do with gangs.
- CW: Now, I've read that Montgomery Clift and Jerome Robbins were lovers, and Montgomery Clift was the one who gave the idea to Jerome Robbins.
- JR: It could have been. The original idea was, "Let's do *Romeo and Juliet*. Let's do it on the East Side of New York about a Jewish family and a Catholic family during the Easter Passover times." You know, a Jewish person and a Catholic had fallen in love.
- JD: The Montagues and the Capulets...
- JR: I'm just saying...the same thing happens over...they began that in 1949, and the show opened in 1957. The same idea. And suddenly, it hit them, "No, this...and they were reading an article about gang warfare on New York's West side. And they said..."
- JD: ...Right where Lincoln Center is now.
- JR: It just shows you that's another example of what happens over time, and you just have to kind of go with the flow. If you don't, you're making a mistake. You've got to, as John said, "Listen to what the show is telling you."
- CW: Is this the first adaptation from a straight drama to a musical that you've done, Jimmy?
- JR: Yes! Oh no, I did...from a movie, an adaptation with Joe DiPietro...a German movie called *Men*, a comedy. We called ours *The Thing About Men*, and it opened Off-Broadway. So, he wrote a script, I'm sure Cat would do that too, followed the movie, and then wrote what he wanted it to be as a musical. Left room for where the songs might be. That's kind of how you do it if you're doing a musical, which is leave room for the songs.

Sometimes, they say, that the songwriters cannibalize the playwright's script... take the best, juicy parts, and take it away from that playwright. Maybe it's dialogue, whatever, a monologue, and turn it into a song. They say, like, *West Side Story* again, if you look at just the book, it's very teeny. The musical...music carries it.

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CW: Okay, I have a couple of questions, and Catherine tried to explain this to me... the job of...who the composer is, who the lyricist is, who the librettist is, what does the “book” mean when we talk about a musical? If you could...if you don’t mind elaborating on the different roles and what they mean.

JR: Yeah, isn’t it funny, ‘cuz only people in the trade kind of know what it means you see “book,” which is what you’ll see in any advertisement about a show, as opposed to an opera, which will say “libretto.” But in Broadway, it’s the “book,” and people not in the field don’t know what that is. And I guess that’s why you’re asking. What is that word? Specific only to theater, you might even say New York theater since so many shows begin...y’know, it’s this word that began...I like to think in our city. And I wouldn’t be surprised if the earliest musicals had “libretto...”

CF: Oh, really? I wondered about that...

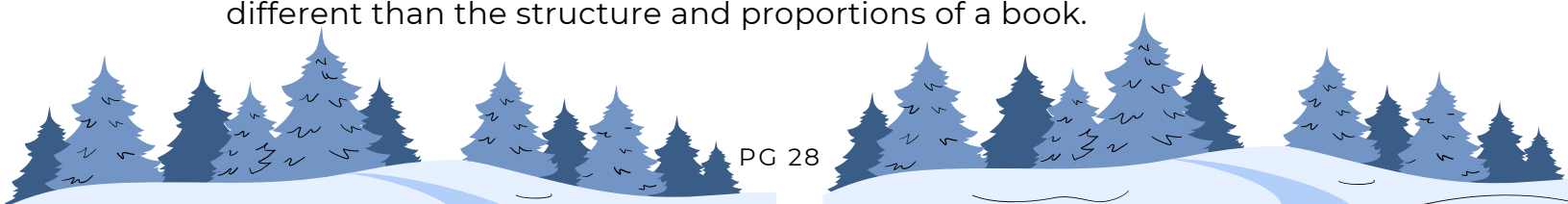
JR: Yeah, who’s doing your book? Which means the script. The story. Probably minus the music and the lyrics.

CW: And that makes sense...

JD: It’s what some people would call the “play” part of it. And then, as Jimmy said, the composer and librettist come in and usually take the juiciest parts of the “play” part of it and they turn those usually high points, dramatic points, or highly comic points, whatever they are and musicalize them because music can bring to those lyrics, to those words, a kind of heightened, new emotion of telling the story. And it pisses the book people off...I’m being facetious... that they take the best dramatic or comic parts and sometimes turn them into the songs. But that’s what the musical, the story, is asking for. Usually, scenes in the musical will end with a song because that’s what the dramatic or comic part of the story is building to...

CW: The book is the foundation...

CF: And then the “rub” is, a book has nothing to do with a play. A play and a book are absolutely not the same thing in any way; that structurally, they do not function the same way. Also, I would say that in libretto writing, you will hear about the recitative which I believe is generally thought to be the “book” in the sense that those are words that do not have music accompany them. But the structure and the proportions in an opera/libretto are completely different than the structure and proportions of a book.



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So, those things are very important to think about. And then I would say as someone who came from a not American culture, came from a Francophone/French culture, the American Musical is something that is very specific, structurally. And I think, very American. And the relationship that the book has to the music is fascinating and...that's where I would like to say that Jimmy Roberts, as a composer, is so well-versed in the mastery of the American Musical. By that I mean, the traditional American Musical. I mean, my siblings and I grew up as French kids listening to *My Fair Lady* and "I Like to Be in America!"

Everything. I mean, we had an LP and we listened over and over, and I was just in Heaven. And it is a gorgeous, gorgeous form, and that's why it's a real thrill to be able to work with Jimmy because he is a master at that form.

CW: So, the composer creates the music. Is that correct?

JR: The composer in a musical becomes like an author and a dramatist in a way. You might call them a "musical dramatist." So, yeah, it's the music, it's music specifically related to character of the story...

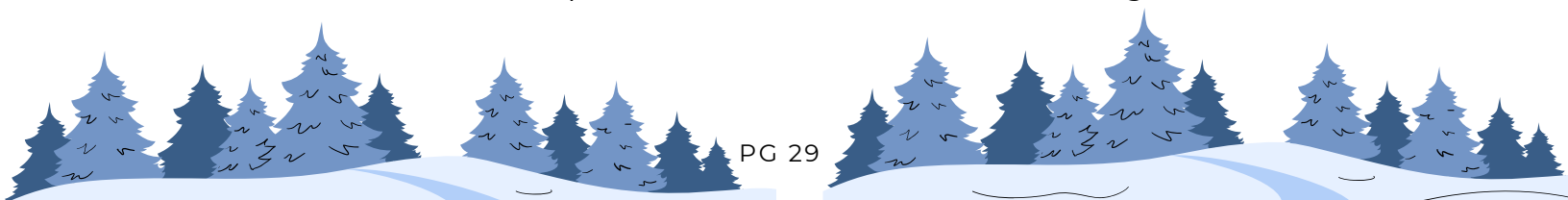
JD: And the emotional moment that is appearing in the story...

JR: So, it's very specific music that you have to have the knack of. It's not like writing a symphony. It's a miniature form. A song might last three minutes and between words and music, you have to make that audience feel the impact of that in that brief amount of time. And there are all kinds of challenges to that.

JD: Jimmy, what is the...it's not your quote. The quote about...

JR: About words and music? I hope you mean this one. The famous lyricist of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" had a wonderful phrase about why even a three-minute song can be so powerful in theater and in songs in general. He said, "Music makes you feel feelings. Words make you think thoughts. But a song makes you feel a thought." So that's what's going on.

I'm going to tell you, Connie, that the biggest challenge though is audiences are smart...generally. I mean, you could say they're dumbed down in other ways. But each person is a kind of sensitive organism and they're hopefully entranced by your story. But there are certain techniques that storytellers have to have that keep the audience a little bit on the edge of their seats.



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So, the challenge is, because they're smart, not having a song or a scene, where they go, "Oh, I know what's gonna happen here. I know what that song's gonna be about, and now I have to listen to it, but I already know what it's about." And the authors don't necessarily know that. They think, "I gotta let my audience know what my characters are feeling. I have to make this part of the story clear." And the fine line is a little bit clear but maybe a little not so clear. That there's something to be learned.

JD: You don't want them to get ahead of you.

JR: That's the phrase. If they're ahead of you, which is very easy to do, you'll feel it. I bet you've felt it in a play or something where you feel that. It's a thin line. You don't want to be obscure.

CW: "Big Dipper." Is that the name of the inn?

JR: You guessed it. The reason for that emerges as the story goes on.

CW: Really quickly. The dates of previews and the cast. The artistic team. The additional artistic team. So, you said the York Theatre and you begin previews.

JR: I believe November 21st. We open Thanksgiving Week. Tuesday, November 26th. It's a cast of 10 and an orchestra of 4, and an inn on stage that you can check into.

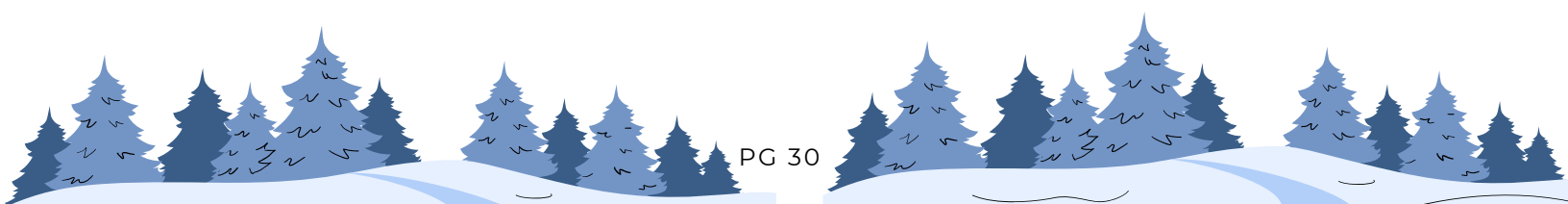
CF: It runs through the end of the year.

JD: It closes December 29th, which is a Sunday, I believe.

CW: There was something that you mentioned earlier, John, and I've only ever taken one musical theater class, and what I learned in that class is that in life or whatever, you can't simply speak the words, you have to break into song. You have to sing.

JD: Exactly...

CW: That's sort of the theory of a musical, opera, whatever. But you have to break into song because the emotion is so great.



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JD: Right and those, as I said, those are the moments that the composer/lyricist finds those really high points or those low points or those comic points whatever they might be. And it's interesting...it's a very different story than the play, (the script part that Catherine wrote), the moments that are turned into songs, because Jimmy and I went through earlier versions, and I would say I had done an outline for and so on, and we had pirated them, I guess you would say. We had turned them into songs into the moments where we thought this is where we needed a song, and then we ripped that all down, and we did it again, and we ripped all that down, and we heard the show speaking, what it wanted to be. But where those songs arrive and happen even in the existing version now are very close to where the emotional moments that are written in Catherine's play. And it was a very different script and it was very different in the sense that there was a character in Catherine's script who's a heterosexual cross dresser, who kept on kind of hijacking...in the musical version, hijacking the focus of our musical. And we had to kind of take our story by the horns, so to speak, and steer it away from that. But it was a learning curve for me because I was always on the other side of this as an actor, "on the boards," as they say. And very enlightening to see how sometimes doing this, the story, the event of writing it, can just take you over as a person. And all of a sudden, you're writing. And there really is such a thing as a muse, and it takes you over, and you write, and it guides you where you need to be. "Oh, that's what this character needs to say," or wants to say, and that was very creatively satisfying for me.

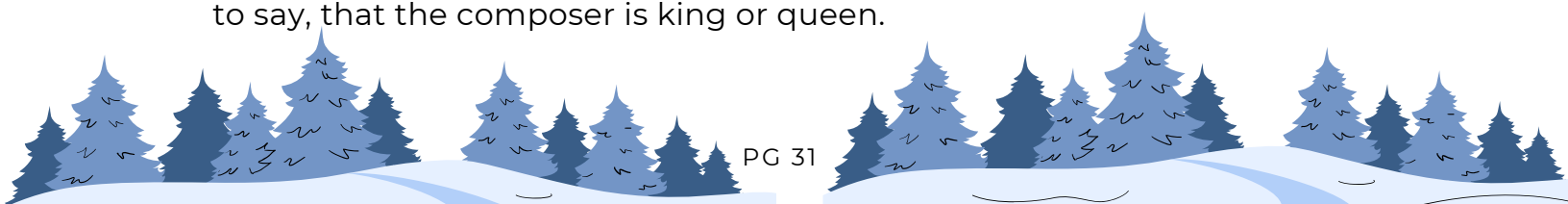
JR: I could picture a novelist writing a book with several characters, and the novelist thinks that this is what the story is, but in his mind, some character keeps saying, "No, I'm the one...", and he has to listen.

CW: So, the lyricist is the one who writes the lyrics. And the librettist is...

CF: A librettist is for an opera. The difference is that those categories aren't broken up. A librettist writes everything. All the words are written by the librettist. Whereas here, we see that there's a split between lyrics and books. And as you can see from all the musicals that you'll look at; they differ as to who does what. But with a libretto, the whole thing...all the words are written...

CW: So, it's written by one or two people.

CF: No, generally a librettist is one person. But the composer is, I think it's fair to say to say, that the composer is king or queen.



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JR: In an opera.

CF: In an opera; in a good way. I would say in a musical as well.

JR: In a musical, the composer is usually credited, but in an opera...y'know, all we we know is Verdi, you couldn't say who wrote the libretto for some of these musicals...operas, they're not as well known. Fortunately, in musicals, the book writers...it's a collaboration.

CF: Yes, I mean the "threesome" model that I described, in terms of collaboration, is important because...what I found fascinating in this piece is that it had an organic quality that I have never seen before. And that was like...I, as a playwright, would tend to be a little bit more driven and prescriptive. This had an organic quality to it that I think Jimmy led us forward on, where there was this sort of, like, we don't know where the songs are going to come from. They are going to bubble out and that organic quality...if you trust the journey, the collaborators will continue, and hopefully, it will continue into the rehearsal process because it really is an organic beast, in the best sense of the word that is created.

CW: Are you referring specifically to Big Dipper or...

CF: The Big Dipper.

CW: Do you expect re-writes?

CF: Well, see, that's where I would say that "burbling" thing...we've been doing re-writes. We have been imagining and singing and doing all of this together already, all the time for years. I learned that as a librettist early on, it's much harder to change music. In my first opera, I did 13 drafts of the libretto before the composer scored it. And it's a lot easier to do that kind of work beforehand. So, that's what I'm talking about. In terms of that "organic thing," we've been doing re-writes. We've been shaping down. Even Jimmy with the orchestrator now, he wants to know exactly when does a song end; how does a song end. Because everything we can do to prepare for the staging beforehand and feel it out is going to be useful.

JD: It's easy to nip and tuck and make changes to the book part of it, but it's much more difficult to make the changes that happen internally within the song because of the music being set and scored, and so on.

CW: Because it's a bit more technical. Music is math. It's very technical...

CF: It's also...Connie, it's handing out to the four people in the band, ten actors...



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As a playwright, I'm spoiled. I mean, it's already hard...six actors, we're changing lines, but multiply that by tons of things.

CW: Is there choreography in this piece?

CF: Yes!

CW: Okay. So, it's all interconnected. You change one line and it changes everything.

Well, any last words?

JD: We're excited. We're thankful that it's being done. We are cautiously optimistic that it will all come together and that people will find the story entertaining and moving and will be taken on the journey of the story we're trying to tell.

JR: And since it's a new musical, they say, "The final collaborator is the audience." So, that's why changes may happen in this process. I don't look forward to that, but...

CF: And we have previews, which is great. We did go out of town to Syracuse to do a workshop.

JR: Yes, very successfully in a workshop in Syracuse.

JD: The Red House.

JR: So, come see Welcome to the Big Dipper.



CONNIE WINSTON holds an MFA in dramaturgy from the University of Iowa's Department of Theater and is a former member of the Playwrights' Workshop.



Company of *Welcome to the Big Dipper*



CATHERINE FILLOUX is an award-winning French Algerian American playwright, librettist, and activist, who has been writing about human rights for many decades. Filloux's new play "How to Eat an Orange" was commissioned by INTAR and premieres at La MaMa in New York City in 2024. Her new musical "Welcome to the Big Dipper" premieres Off-Broadway at the York Theatre in New York City in 2024.