

A few thoughts from the director...

Working on an original piece of theatre is a rare opportunity for me. I have collaborated a number of times with my dear friend, Lee Papa, on crafting one-person shows based around his blog "character" the Rude Pundit and it was always terrifically fun and challenging and that resulted in critically acclaimed productions presented in New York City at the International Fringe Festival and twice in Calgary, Canada at the One Yellow Rabbit Theatre. Getting to work on those shows with someone I am creatively in sync with was always exciting and creatively fulfilling.

A few years ago, I worked with a local "playwright/composer/multihyphenate" on her show which will remain nameless in these notes as it was the worst experience of my 40+ years in theatre. What I was hoping would be an exciting experience for myself, my colleagues, and the community ended up being a complete nightmare in every way. Suffice to say, I came out of it wondering if I would ever work on an original play again. But, last March I received an email from Jason Spraggins asking if I would be interested in reading a new, unproduced musical he had been working on for about a decade, and not just any musical, a True-Crime Musical Thriller about notorious serial killer, John Wayne Gacy. He also suggested an interest in finding a theatre that might want to do a staged reading. I thought that it would be worth looking at and could maybe be a fun little presentation we could do at the beginning of the semester, so I responded positively as I also was in the process of trying to decide on a fall musical production and was not feeling overly inspired by the choices I was pursuing. Also, frankly, I am a fan of serial killers, I find clowns to be creepy, and I am always interested in strange and unusual plays on which to work.

As I began to read the play, I was drawn into the world that Jason created. Even though it was, in many ways, our world, populated by relatable characters that were based on the actual people affected by the horrors of Gacy's actions, it was so engaging and interesting and, to my fevered imagination, very stageable. Jason had created a play with so many powerful visual moments that I could see in my mind's eye. I also found myself so interested in the songs and how he incorporated them into the play. I simply read through the lyrics as if they were poetry. It was actually a while before I clicked on the links to the recorded songs Jason provided me. I needed to understand the songs and why they existed in the piece before I could listen to them as music. What I discovered is that the songs make sense as moments of illumination into the character's desires or, as often is the case with Gacy, the illumination of his delusions, lies, and misdirection.

The more I lived with *Crawlspace* in my head, the more I began to think, "why do a staged reading when we can actually do a full production"? I also realized there was something else at the heart of Jason's play, a very contemporary parable about how little

we know about our neighbors and how horrifying it can be to discover the dark secrets in the hearts of our friends and neighbors. Fear has become a daily emotion in America in 2022, and we have all become either John Wayne Gacy's neighbors or John Wayne Gacy himself. In fact, maybe we are all a little of both.

With my unbridled enthusiasm in place, I decided to pitch the idea to my colleagues of presenting *Crawlspace: A True-Crime Musical Thriller* as the official fall production for the 2022-2023 Season in the Backdoor Playhouse. If they had any doubts, they didn't express them to me. I was met with a resounding, "let's do it". Ironically, I asked Bob and James before asking Jason, although I could not imagine a scenario where a playwright would say, "no" to a production of their play, and I was correct. Jason seemed cautiously enthusiastic when I pitched him the idea and we were full steam ahead.

Oh, yes, a word about the music. I don't want to suggest the music wasn't important as clearly, if the music does not work the musical will fail. Once I started listening to Matt Glickstein's music for *Crawlspace*, I found it very effective and memorable. Although I have directed numerous musicals in my career, I do not always feel qualified to judge the quality of music. Working with my music director, Mendy Richards, allows me to move forward with working on a production knowing that there is an expert to handle the musical aspects of the show. She confirmed my instinct that the music was good, and that singers and musicians could perform it.

The next question that needed answering was could we stage the piece in the Backdoor Playhouse. I had no reason to worry as Bob and I began pitching ideas back and forth and it was clear he could do this. He is an amazing collaborator, artist and educator.

So, eight months since first contact, and nine weeks of rehearsals, a cast of eighteen, a crew of twenty-seven, and six musicians, are ready to bring you the World Premiere of *Crawlspace: A True-Crime Musical Thriller* by Jason Spraggins and Matt Glickstein. What a journey this has been, and I am grateful to everyone who made it possible.

Mark H. Creter, Artistic Director

1992-present