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Murder Pass: Tackling Toxic Masculinity through Musical Comedy

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Introduction

Musical theater has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. From the age of eight, I would do anything to be on stage singing, dancing, and acting to my heart's content. This passion continued throughout my life and ultimately led me to choose to pursue acting as a degree during my undergraduate college experience. But I had another passion from a young age as well: writing. However, I never thought these two passions of mine could mix. I would write plays because I didn't feel confident enough writing music, or I would perform in musicals because I knew I could sing but not write in the same way. All of that changed when, during my junior year of college, I enrolled in a class called Writing for the Musical Theater taught by renowned musical theater writer Ryan Scott Oliver. That class changed my perspective on how I could write, and also introduced me to Alex Knezevic, the musician who pushed me to write what I never thought I could: a full-length musical.

When tasked with conceiving and writing a musical as part of the course, Alex and I joined forces with him as the composer and co-lyricist and myself as the book writer and co-lyricist. As the composer, Alex was in charge of all of the music in the show and helped author the lyrics to the songs. As the book writer, I was responsible for the structural arc of the story, writing the script and dialogue, and helping Alex with the lyrics. When asked to come up with a topic for the musical we were going to write, Alex and I were both immediately drawn to tackling something broad in a way that could be relatable for audiences. We had several ideas ranging from a musical based on the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria to a story about a scientist who finds a cure for cancer but has her work stolen. But the idea that stuck out from the beginning was a musical that would tackle issues surrounding toxic masculinity. We were

also drawn to the idea of musical comedy, and after watching a particularly horrible murder-musical-comedy online, thought the genre of murder-comedy held a lot of humorous potential. But once we had all of these pieces, we struggled to find a way to fit them all together until it hit us one day when wondering about what populations were under-served in horror: lacrosse players.

Once the idea of a lacrosse murder-musical comedy entered our heads, we couldn't shake it. It immediately stood out as the perfect topic that layered in all of the things we hoped to accomplish in writing a musical together. We settled on the idea of following a Division II college boy's lacrosse team as they embark on a weekend getaway to their team captain's lake house to decide who the new team captain will be. But once the lacrosse bros (as they are affectionately known as in colloquial terms today) start disappearing and turning up murdered around the lake house, the team realizes that they are either not alone out in the woods or one of them might be out for blood. We also decided we wanted the music to feel a bit like it was straight from a boy band's album, and we settled on inspiration from bands like NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys, but we wanted to modernize it and make it sound like it was being played by a contemporary artist like Bruno Mars or Justin Bieber.

But the question still remained: how do we talk about issues within this community of men – such as toxic masculinity, homophobia within “bro culture,” and sexism – in a palatable way that audiences would enjoy. We knew we did not want to layer on the social commentary, but we also did not want people to think it was just a trivial musical comedy. I chose to focus my research on creating the story on these social issues, particularly homophobia within bro culture. Even though we knew that wasn't going to be the central plot of the story, I knew it was a plotline we wanted to include and I wanted to do it justice and ensure it was as well written as

possible. We set out to create an exciting new piece of musical theater that would challenge both the norms of societal conversation about topics of masculinity in our culture and the norms of contemporary musical theater writing. We wanted to create something unlike people had heard or seen before, and we wanted to do it in a way that would leave audiences thinking about the tough issues we wanted to tackle with a better vocabulary for talking about them.

Methods

In order to fully investigate these central issues and questions of inspiration, we felt compelled to conduct plentiful amounts of research before any actual writing on the project began. Under the guidance of our professor, Ryan Scott Oliver, we started from a very simple place: an Internet search. We wanted to gather a greater understanding of the broader issues surrounding toxic masculinity, how homophobia played a role in the ideas of masculinity, and how both of those intersect with collegiate sports and team environments. After that initial search, I found myself drawn to the complex issues of the presence of homophobia within this perceived “bro culture” within sports environments, what role it played in the development and success of both openly gay and closeted male athletes, and how best we could portray those struggles through what we wanted to write.

To research these specific issues further, I started with the book *Dude, You're a Fag* by C.J. Pascoe that gave me a strong foundational understanding of masculinity issues in educational settings. Through the JSTOR database I read the articles “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” by R.W. Connell, “Updating the Outcome: Gay Athletes, Straight Teams, and Coming Out in Educationally Based Sports Teams” by Eric Anderson, “A Very ‘Gay’ Straight” by Tristan Bridges, and “Sport and Masculinity: The Promise and Limits of Title IX” by Deborah L. Brake, all of which furthered my understanding of the psychological causes

of toxically masculine behavior and the culture behind homosexuality and toxic masculinity on collegiate sports teams. We also watched the documentary film *The Mask You Live In*, written and directed by Jennifer Newsome, to hear first-hand accounts from men of different ages about their struggles to fit into the molds of traditional masculinity and the effects that has had on their lives.

After the initial research was completed, we began drafting ideas for the actual creation of the musical we wanted to write. To get a stronger sense of how to tell stories about important topics without being too on the nose, we heavily relied upon Robert McKee's book *Story*, which served as a strong guide for how to tell stories in a meaningful way, create interesting and compelling characters, and structure stories to keep audiences engaged and entertained. Once we created a general idea of plot structure, we turned to current events and newspaper articles for inspiration of specific plot points in our musical, particularly newspaper articles about incidents of hazing on college campuses (either within Greek life or sports teams). We also listened to and watched many hours of musical theater to gain a better understanding of what was going to work best for our needs stylistically, to see what had already been done (and overdone), and to develop our own musical theater writing style.

After the writing began, we knew that, in order to test the effectiveness of our musical in tackling these broader social issues, we had to start putting material in front of an audience. It began with presenting small segments of the show for our classmates in the Writing for the Musical Theater course, but because all of the students in that class were learning the same curriculum about writing that we were, they were a bit more critical than a traditional audience may be. We then presented two songs from the show in a concert setting at the popular cabaret venue 54 Below to sold-out audiences. Provided with minimal context of the show, the audiences

expressed very positive reactions and responded very well to the humor within the songs. As a next step, we presented the full first act of the musical to an invited audience of our peers and were met with very positive reviews. In order to test the overall effectiveness of delivering our message to an audience, a full staged reading of the musical has been arranged in a 98-seat theater in midtown Manhattan where tickets will be sold to the general public.

Literature Review

To better understand contemporary definitions of masculinity and what can make it “toxic,” author R.W. Connell, in the article “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” offers that “the idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (831). She goes on to state: “hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men’s engaging in toxic practices...that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting” (Connell 840). This idea of dominance (and the fight for it) in certain settings led to a better structural understanding of how to write situations in which the masculinity of the characters of *Murder Pass* would be tested. One further point that Connell makes is that “hegemonic masculinity is not a self-reproducing form,” and she goes on to infer that “to sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men...discrediting the ‘soft’ options to the ‘hard,’...[the presence of] homophobic assaults,...all the way to the teasing of boys in schools” (844). This understanding of toxic masculinity needing to be passed on and not something innately understood helped contextualize where these toxic habits come from and why they are so hard for men to break from.

In the article “Updating the Outcome: Gay Athletes, Straight Teams, and Coming Out in Educationally Based Sports Teams,” author Eric Anderson provides the context that “sports associate boys and men with masculine dominance by constructing their identities and sculpting

their bodies to align with hegemonic perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression” and that “competitive sports teams are highly homophobic in Western cultures” (250). Through a study of high school and university-level athletes, Anderson found that the close bond between male teammates of contact, team-based sports “has traditionally created a rigid and tightly policed bond between team members in accordance with the mandates of hegemonic masculinity” (263). But in comparing this research, done in 2010, with previous research done in 2002, Anderson found that “athletes in the 2010 group found their sexualities accepted by their teammates” and “none reported that their teammates tried to publicly or privately heterosexualize them” (264). Reading about this research opened the door for a greater understanding of the experience of openly gay athletes on traditionally heterosexual contact sports team, such as lacrosse, which helped with the development of not only the openly gay character in *Murder Pass*, but also with the struggles of the closeted gay character being written.

To contextualize the idea that masculinity has various components and that many of those components are fluid, author Tristan Bridges offers the term “hybrid masculinities” to describe how many men have “bits and pieces” of different components of traditional masculinity that make up their own (59). Bridges’ research analyzes how certain groups of men will distance themselves from areas of masculinity that they define as “toxic” in order to seem like the “good guys” to both other men and women (75). Author Deborah L. Brake, in her article “Sport and Masculinity: The Promise and Limits of Title IX,” shares that different levels of masculinity can be adopted from different sports. She writes: “Not all sports masculinize male athletes to the same degree, and not all boys or men are masculinized in precisely the same way,” and adds that “the more violent and/or aggressive the sport is...the more masculine it is” (Brake 210). Tying these two authors’ ideas together in formulating how different sports (and different life

experiences) shape the way that men perceive masculinity and what level of masculinity they want to outwardly portray helped with the development of different characters who exhibit different levels of both conscious and unconscious toxic masculinity.

In his book, *Dude, You're a Fag*, author C.J. Pascoe explains that “homophobia is indeed a central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity” (53). But Pascoe argues that simply calling this “teasing” homophobic doesn’t fully cover the phenomenon occurring and states: “Invoking homophobia to describe the way boys aggressively tease each other overlooks the powerful relationship between masculinity and this sort of insult” (54). Later, in discussing ways to combat homophobia in adolescent educational settings, he offers: “gay men may be in a unique position to challenge gendered as well as sexual norms” (Pascoe 82-83), and also found that “the sort of gendered homophobia that constituted adolescent masculinity did not constitute adolescent femininity” (Pascoe 56). The idea that gay men (and women, for that matter) are in a unique position to challenge traditional ideas of masculinity and fight against homophobia heavily influenced the dialogue between our one female character, Sarah, our one openly gay character, Declan, and the rest of the characters who exhibit more traditionally toxically masculine traits and struggle to see the adverse effects their words and actions can have.

Findings and Discussion

The primary finding after embarking this journey was the challenge of creating compelling and entertaining theater that can still deliver a powerful social message without either being sacrificed. There were many times throughout the writing process during which we found that the broader social themes we wanted to tackle – toxic masculinity, homophobia within “bro culture,” etc. – were fading the background because we were getting wrapped up in the glamor of

writing the comedy of the musical. Inversely, there were also times when we were so focused on layering in the social issues and the broader themes of self-worth that the humor and theatricality of the show took a backseat. Striking that balance became an ongoing struggle and one that we continued to have until the completion of the musical. The navigation of the issue was challenging because you may not realize one has been sacrificed until you put the production in front of an audience and are able to gauge their reactions (laughter, applause, etc.).

Another finding that emerged specifically out of the process of writing musical comedy was that we at no point wanted to satirize the more serious issues that we were addressing despite the show being largely humorous in nature. We never wanted the audience to feel like we were making fun of the social issues that we were trying to highlight and provide commentary on, but rather use the genre to elevate these issues to a level where people could have healthy discussions about them as a result of seeing the show. All along we wanted to create this musical in a way that was palatable for audiences who might not want broader themes to be hit directly on the head when seeing a stage production, especially with themes as heavy and abstract as toxic masculinity. The ultimate solution to this was to have certain characters (such as Thad and Topher), who provided most of the comic relief of the show, be the primary instigators of “toxic masculinity,” while having characters such as Spencer and Sarah be more grounded in their morals and beliefs that they understood the dangers and ramifications of behaving like the other characters.

The character of Declan became a challenge because he remained the only openly gay character in the musical, so we did not want to trivialize his character by making him only exist in the realm of comedy, but we also didn’t want to tokenize the experience of an openly gay lacrosse player. His character remained in a middle ground that often delves into comedy to

relieve the stresses of scenes, but also stands up for himself when he feels as though he is being targeted. Lance's character also provided us with a bit of a challenge because of his status as a closeted gay man who gets outed during the second act of the show. We did not want to trivialize the experience of being outed by your peers in our show just because it was a comedy since that can be a traumatic event for young men in settings like the world of *Murder Pass*. It was a moment in the show we had to handle with care, do a bit of extra research on, and be sure we tested out with several people before ultimately putting it in the show.

A finding that did not emerge until we got to the stage of production was the debate of having characters that may or may not identify the same way as their characters in the musical do. For instance, we debated the importance of having an openly gay actor play the role of Declan, having a straight actor play the role of Thad, and so on. The complexity of Lance's character came back into play when casting his role because we were not sure whether it would be more beneficial to have an actor who identifies as gay play the role. We also debated whether taking these things into consideration was vital to the success of the musical, and that is a debate that consumes the minds of many people in the contemporary theater industry. The identities of different actors can play into the way they approach certain roles, but the question often came up of whether a strong enough writing team can solve those issues with writing or if it truly is better to have actors with similar backgrounds to their characters.

Creating cutting-edge pieces of musical theater that can tackle broader social issues is undoubtedly of major importance in the contemporary theater world. Musicals of the past lacked the agency to address pressing issues and that leaves it up to today's writers and composers to use their platform to bring tougher conversations into the public eye. In recent years we have seen an increase in musicals tackling topics like mental health, death and grieving, racism,

injustice, and war. Musical theater is no longer the realm of jazz hands and kick lines – it is becoming the realm of finding innovative new ways to start conversations that no one else is willing to have. My writing partner and I set out to do exactly that: start a conversation about toxic masculinity that we did not feel like anybody else was willing to start. Through our process, we gained a broader understanding of the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity on young men and boys, the unfathomable things that young men will do to find a sense of belonging amongst their male peers, and where men who don't fit into a mold of traditional masculinity find themselves standing in organized structures like collegiate sports teams. We used our talents as writers to bring these issues to the forefront of our musical and show audiences that there are ways to have intentional and meaningful conversations about tough issues if you are willing to look at things with an open mind – and sometimes even a sense of humor. The journey to create *Murder Pass* has not been easy, but nothing worth having or doing has ever been easy, and we cannot wait to see what new conversations a musical like this can start in today's world of theater.

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