

Arts and Entertainment

Broadway

Brian Yorkey Discusses “If / Then,” Idina Menzel, and the Writing Process

By LEV AKABAS

Have you ever found yourself looking back on important decisions you’ve made, wondering how your life could have been different? What if you had gone to Bronx Science, instead of Stuyvesant? What if you had asked out that someone you had a crush on in middle school?

The new Broadway musical “If / Then,” which opened on March 30, 2014, plays on this idea. Idina Menzel, recently lauded for her vocal performance in Disney’s “Frozen,” plays Elizabeth, a 39-year-old urban planner who moves to New York City to start her life anew. In the opening scene, she meets her friends Kate, a lesbian kindergarten teacher, and Lucas, a bisexual community organizer, for lunch. Kate pushes Elizabeth to be adventurous and explore new experiences, while Lucas urges her to make professional contacts in the city. In one reality, Eliza-

beth stops to listen to a musician in the park with Kate; in the other, she leaves with Lucas to attend a protest against a development project, setting up the two paths that are followed throughout the show.

Writer and lyricist Brian Yorkey teams up once again with music composer Tom Kitt, just as they did to write the 2008 musical “Next to Normal,” for which they won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award. Their story explores destiny and choice, with underlying themes of love, regret, and fresh starts. Characters like Lucas, who is socially awkward, yet a trustworthy friend, are dynamic and relatable, evoking sympathy from the audience. The songs feature elaborate harmonies, as well as witty lyrics, and showcase Menzel’s powerful vocals that we all remember from her previous musicals, “Rent” and “Wicked.” Menzel’s final solo, “Starting Over,” was incredibly emotional in both its lyrics and delivery on stage, moving the majority

of the audience to tears as she held the final note of the song the way that only she can.

Though Menzel stands out, another unique element of the show is the constantly changing set, complete with a retractable fire escape, mirrors that reveal reflected lights on the floor of the stage, and a circle in the center of the stage that rotates during some scenes. Movable blocks are used to create every setting imaginable, from a subway train to a studio apartment.

“If / Then” is not only a roller-coaster ride full of twists and turns, but is also deeply thought-provoking, capped off with a clever and surprising ending. After seeing a preview of the show, I had the pleasure of interviewing Brian Yorkey about the messages he hopes to convey with his story, the process of writing and developing it, and the experience of writing songs for Idina Menzel.



Lydia Wu / The Spectator

LA: Where did you get the idea to do the show and how were you inspired to write it?

BY: It was Tom Kitt’s idea originally. He wanted to write something about the way lives unfold, and the way we make choices, but we don’t always know which choices are going to end up having a huge effect on our lives. And we don’t always know how little things and big things that happen to us are going to play out [or] the role of choice and chance in any life if you stop and think about the “what-ifs.” What if I had just done this instead of that? What if I had just met this person instead of that person? What if I had gone to a different school? With the “what-ifs,” big and small, you can imagine a lot of different paths for yourself. Starting from that idea, we came up with this notion of a show that followed several possible lives of one character. We know it’s been done before in movies or books, but it had never been seen on stage, and we thought putting that story on stage would have some unique challenges and that might be fun.

But at first I wasn’t sure how it was a musical, because I think a musical has to have something that wants to be told in music. I wasn’t sure how it was a musical until I realized that there’s this whole question of whether or not we’re destined to meet the person we fall in love with or whether it’s just chance, and once I knew that that question could be at the heart of it, I knew that it could be a romantic show, and that said musical to me.

LA: Once you had that idea, how did it go from just an idea to becoming a Broadway show?

BY: We started with the character, and we knew from a pretty early point that we’d be working with Idina, so we started with a woman in her late thirties. Then we came up with this idea of her already having lived her life and made some choices she regretted, having wasted some years doing things she didn’t want to do, and then moving back to New York City to start over. After that, we came up with the notion that in one strand, she would meet this man right away and in one strand, she wouldn’t. That was how we started to flesh out the story: looking at different turns that her life might take upon returning to New York City.

LA: How did working with Idina Menzel influence the experience of writing this show?

BY: Everyone knows she’s a spectacular singer, but she’s also a really great and deep actress, and a beautiful person. It was that humanity in her that was so inspiring all the way through, because I always knew we were writing for someone with great gifts as a performer, but also someone who was going to respond to the things that were human in the story, and to the things that were emotional and honest.

But it’s an amazing thing to write a song for Idina. That’s an experience like no other. You can do certain things that you can’t necessarily do with a song for your average mortal. Another part of it is that she really keeps us honest. The things that really make sense for her to perform are the things that are right for the show, and if they don’t feel right, they’re probably not right, and that’s been our guide all the way through.

LA: Once you had the show, how did it develop further and what kind of changes did you have to make?

BY: We did five workshops where you spend two weeks with the material and the cast and you go through the songs, and during the last workshop, you perform them standing in place with music stands. In each workshop, we learned more about the characters, what parts of the story were compelling, and what parts we didn’t really believe.

The biggest challenge throughout has been to make the whole thing clear to the audience. There’s a tremendous potential for confusion, and that was our project for those five workshops. Then we did an out-of-town production in Washington D.C. at the end of the year and learned even more about how we could clarify things. I feel like we’ve got it to a point now where it’s all there, but you still have to lean forward and pay attention a little bit, or else you could be lost pretty easily.

Along the way, songs that you had written for one storyline go away when that storyline changes and then you write a new song, so I think along the way we’ve written maybe 30 songs that aren’t even in the show.

LA: What were some specific changes that you made to make it a little clearer for audiences?

BY: The biggest change is in the opening. In Washington D.C., we did this cool switcheroo so it looked like you were seeing two of Idina at the same time, and we recorded her voice so it looked like she was in two different places. And people had no clue what we were doing. They were absolutely befuddled. So we really cleared up the opening and tried to say, “Here’s what we’re doing. There’s a woman making this choice, and from this choice, we’re going to follow two branches of her life, and see what happens.” So that’s the biggest difference, because right from the top of the show, I feel like the opening number does a pretty good job of letting people know the ride they’re getting on and hopefully getting them on it.

LA: Why do you think this show is so appealing to an audience?

BY: Idina’s a big part of it for sure. But I hope people identify with this question of looking back at your life and the “what-ifs” that we all think about. Because I don’t think anyone’s path is a straight line. We all bend and weave and turn, and along the way you don’t always know when your life is making a big turn. Sometimes you do, but sometimes you don’t, and it’s only years later that you look back and see your life in an entirely new direction. And I think the show really dramatizes that and shows how so much of what’s joyful and painful in life can come out of the way that fate and small choices interact, and I hope that’s a compelling thing for people to walk out of the theatre thinking about.

LA: During the show I definitely found myself thinking, “If I was in her position, what would I have done?”

BY: Exactly. You think you’re rooting for one side, but then you realize that you’re actually rooting for her to go and do something else.

LA: And it definitely made me think about my own life a little bit on the way home.

BY: Good! That’s what we hope. I love dumb musicals as much as anybody, but I’m not really interested in writing them. I’d rather write something that’s a little bit more of a meal, where you walk away with something to chew on—something to argue about with your friends and family. That’s the kind of experience I hope to give people.