

A Gentleman's Guide Hits the Road

Steven Lutvak was a college student having a sleepless night. He turned on the television to pass the time, and came across the movie *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. "I had this epiphany," he says. "I thought, 'This is a musical. It's a musical that's mine to write, and I don't yet know how to write it. But one day I will.'"

That was in 1978. Over the years, his conviction grew. After several attempts, he obtained the rights to the film in 2003 and asked Robert L. Freedman, with whom he had previously collaborated, to work with him on the show. They read Roy Horniman's 1907 novel, *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal*, which was the inspiration for the movie, and wrote a musical based on both sources.

Then they lost the film rights and began rewriting, getting rid of any material adapted from the movie. "The show is better because of it," says Freedman. "We no longer felt like we were replicating a classic film. The first draft had a lot of stuff that we invented out of whole cloth, and getting away from the film gave us more freedom. We wrote the show we wanted to write."

The show is *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, winner of the 2014 Tony Award for Best New Musical, and it launches a national tour this month. Directed by Darko Tresnjak, *Gentleman's Guide* is the story of Monty Navarro and his hilariously diabolical scheme to inherit a family fortune by knocking off the eight relatives who precede him in the line of succession. Kevin Massey plays Monty while John Rapson plays his eight victims. Lutvak composed the music, Freedman wrote the Tony-winning book, and they co-wrote the lyrics.

Broadway was always their goal, but it took them over a decade to get there. In addition

to the setback with the film, producers were reluctant to take a chance. Some said the show was too old-fashioned. "On more than one occasion, I had to say, 'Yeah, it's just another musical about a serial killer,'" says Lutvak. Other producers loved it, but insisted it wasn't a Broadway show. "Yet we knew it was," says Freedman. "Steve was especially tenacious, and I followed his lead. We just believed in it."

A Gentleman's Guide is, in fact, a throwback. It's a witty musical comedy, the kind that used to dominate Broadway, but which is rarely seen there anymore. The lyrics are meticulously rhymed. Lutvak and Freedman met as students in the first class of the musical theatre program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where their teachers included Stephen Sondheim,

Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, and Jule Styne. "We were incredibly inspired by them," says Freedman. "We definitely celebrate traditional musical theatre. We were raised on that."

Both men were already in their mid-50s when they made it to Broadway, and everything about their life-changing experience continues to delight and amaze them. "I get very choked up thinking about it," says Freedman. "I feel I can confidently say to people that no matter your age or what you've been through in life, you should not give up on your dreams."

Lutvak adds, "We had the time of our lives writing this show, and a lot of belief in it to hold onto it for as long as we did. Among the greatest thrills in a panoply of thrills is that we hear audiences laughing at what we found funny. That's kind of a miracle. Stories like ours do not usually have endings like this. It's just the most amazing thing." ◆



Steven Lutvak
and Robert L. Freedman

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