

Q&A with Darko Tresnjak – final draft

Well, I thoroughly enjoyed the show and I think it's quite safe to say that a great deal of the success of the show is in the staging and just the absolute fun of it. Why don't we start with what your response was to Steven Lutvak and Robert Freedman's material; how you got involved with *Gentleman's Guide*, in the first place.

Well, in the beginning, several friends and agents told me about it; people seemed to think I was the right person for the show. And then Robert came to see my production of *The Women* at the Old Globe. He loved that and I think he thought that I would be a good match, because that's another wicked comedy. That seems to be my specialty, you know? I like naughty things! I like things that are both appealing *and* a little bit subversive. So, we all met up and when I dug into this musical, about a charming young man who lies and kills eight of his relatives and prospers in the banking industry and his punishment is that he ends up in a three-way with two gorgeous women, I said: "Okay! Sign me on!" It was four years of work before we premiered the piece at Hartford Stage – but from the beginning, I thought Robert and Steven were consummate craftsmen. There were pieces already, when I came along, like the door trio ["I've Decided to Marry You"], which has become kind of a signature, where I thought "this is great."

There are several things about the staging I'd love for you to address. One is the idea of having one man play all of the eight people who die. (Jefferson Mays was nominated for a Tony playing the role on Broadway.)

There were some people who were worried about whether an audience was going to follow the story of a killer. Why would anyone sign on for this? And I said "easy; because if you have a talented actor getting killed over and over again, then each murder is a reward, because he's going to come back as another delightful characterization." So, the way the audience looks forward to the act of killing; that's what is subversive about the show, because he's going to come out next as Lady Salome, or whoever.

And, also, it makes it a little less unforgivable; it's not quite so horrifying, because it's so overtly theatrical.

Yes. I mean, a) they're horrible people, the whole family that he kills – they're all awful, one after the other, in different ways – and b) it just means he'll be back as another delightful characterization, so the audience looks forward to it.

You know, we did so well in New York around Christmas time. And I thought "it's the perfect antidote to holiday entertainment. *Everyone* wants to murder their family!" So, I think those are the reasons why it works.

One of the real virtues of the production is its theatricality: in addition to the one actor who plays all the D'Ysquiths, you have an ensemble of six, who take on different guises, you've got a toy stage. I wonder if you can talk about the theatrical approach.

Well, a friend said that in all likelihood we could get a really good cast, if everyone took ownership [of the show]. So, the way that the piece is constructed is that the ensemble is six; they play many different characters, but each one has a breakaway role. For example, one actress plays Lady Eugenia, or there's the unfortunate ice skater, Miss Barley, who falls through the ice, there's the detective and the magistrate. I think it's good for the morale.

I've done over forty shows with [costume designer] Linda Cho so we started in the swamp at Williamstown, so I was really happy when she won the Tony Award, because she's been my partner in crime in plays, operas, musicals. And then with Alexander [Dodge so set designer and Tony nominee], we just actually remembered that Robert and Steven kept talking about Edwardian toy theaters and we thought, "Great! Let's give them an Edwardian toy theater!" So, the idea actually came from them.

And then we had a lot of fun with the projections. You know, clearly falling off the [church] tower is based on *Vertigo*. But then, the scene with the bees in the garden, that's based on *Maytime*. That's completely based on Jeannette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy; they always seem to have a swing and canopies covered with lilacs and stuff, so I just told the actors, "pretend you're Jeannette and Nelson and he'll just die, stung by bees." There are actually lots of references throughout.

So much of the entertainment is that each of these D'Ysquiths die in different and comic ways. I understand that the hole in the ice [in "Poison in My Pocket"] was originally supposed to be a Ferris wheel?

We went through so many different versions of this so there was a car, and a Ferris wheel, and this and that. Then one day, we were doing a workshop in Hartford so this is eight months before the premiere and it's my favorite day in the collaboration. And Jefferson Mays was in the room. You know, it's so much work, a new musical, and I didn't think the structure of the Ferris wheel worked for me so I wanted something more kinesthetic, like bodies moving. And I thought how do I tell them *again* to rewrite it? Then I started swaying, listening to the music (SINGS) You and I go sailing by/And no one will know! And I thought "it's a skating waltz!" I grabbed Jefferson and I said "Ice skate with me!" He said, "What?" I said, "Be like Torvill and Dean so skate!" So, Jefferson and I started doing a mad skating routine and I said, "it's on ice, it's a lake and he cuts a hole in the ice and they fall through!" And what happened is thirty minutes later, on a napkin, pretty much, Steven and Robert came up with "As I'm cutting, I am contemplating/And the truth is, it's a tad exhilarating." They also came up with "With the rhythm of the violinist/I'll be sawing where I think the ice is thinnest" so which I think are just about my favorite, most sophisticated rhymes in the show.

I spoke at great length with Steve and Robert about the fact that, if you think about it for a moment, Monty's not the most likeable guy ...

Well, he's a talented ambitious young man and he has a talent for murder! And everybody in the audience responds to ambition. What I said, from the moment I started working on it, is "this is the comic side of *The Talented Mister Ripley*." Why do people like those Patricia Highsmith books and movies? Why do we like to see people get away with it? Because, a part of *us* wants to get away with it – whatever it is. In this instance, casting is very, very important. And, it helps that the family is odious. And there is an injustice; they treated Monty's mother like hell.

Now, the other thing that makes this different is the love triangle – Monty's having an affair with a married woman [Sibella], but at the same time, he's romancing another woman [Phoebe D'Ysquith].

Well, what I told the actors is that everybody in the show is poker-faced. And to me, that's an essence of English comedy; that secrets are good. You speak the language very precisely, but underneath it, you're allowed to have secrets.

I want to fast forward; you've been with this show for several years, you've been through some of the ups and downs, legally, and then you're finally able to do it and it goes well in Hartford and it goes well in San Diego and it moves to Broadway. And I just want to talk to you about the Broadway experience and ultimately taking home a Tony, what that experience was like.

Well, it was, for me, overall, very joyous. And I didn't have anything to compare it to, because I had never done a Broadway show before! You know, this is my first time directing a new musical. I've directed musicals before, but this is my first new one. So, I don't have anything to say bad about any of it. I'm most grateful and it was fun. About the Tonys; I decided, things like this don't come along often in life, so I just made up my mind to enjoy myself and be present. It was fun – it was *fun*!

I can imagine! And now, it's run for over a year on Broadway and it's about to go on tour. And I understand that, if anything, the projections and set are going to be larger. What can people expect from the tour?

Well, what they can expect is: we have committed to keep exploring the piece and to making it better. It's interesting, when a show runs for a long time, you see things and you go "oh! I can do this even better." I'm determined to do an even better production of it! And then the other thing is, our show is based on personality. It very much depends on who are in these roles. It's not a mechanical experience at all, so we're committed to tailoring it to the talent that we select for the tour. So, I'm very much going to tweak it for the people coming in. The D'Ysquith role is a virtuosic part; you have to tailor it for the virtuoso playing it.

Finally, I have to say, when I went to see the show recently, one of the things I noticed – and I found very moving – was how many young people were in the audience. They clearly had listened to the cast album and knew the score.

Yes. It's attracting more and more young people. It seems to kind of have a cult status with many of them. You know, some of them have posted videos on YouTube of them doing the door trio ó in one instance, a girl does all three parts! It's very funny. I hear from friends who teach in musical theater programs around the country and people are coming in with songs from *Gentleman's Guide*. It's a new musical that requires, especially for women, a certain kind of Julie Andrews purity of singing and there isn't a lot of that being written, so I think people with those kind of voices are really responding to it. So, audiences are getting younger.