

## *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* – Playbill Copy – long – final draft

When the Tony Awards were handed out in June of 2014, the stylishly comic musical, *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, took home four trophies, including the biggest: Best Musical. "It was the most incredible thing," says author Robert Freedman, who also took home an award for best book, "it's surreal and it's wonderful." His collaborator, Steven Lutvak, who wrote the music and co-authored the lyrics, adds, "given the almost eleven years that we had worked on the show, to win that was nothing less than astonishing."

Both Lutvak and Freedman, who met in 1981 at NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program, and director Darko Tresnjak, made their Broadway debuts with *Gentleman's Guide*, which Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, called "inspired and hilarious." The plot, loosely based on a 1907 novel by Roy Horniman, which also served as the inspiration for the film comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, concerns a penniless young man named Monty Navarro who discovers that he is the ninth in line to become the Earl of Highhurst. Since the aristocratic family, the D'Ysquiths, disinherited his deceased mother and denies his existence, Monty takes matters into his own hands; he knocks off each of his relatives, one by one, in outrageously amusing ways. What keeps the musical light and entertaining is that every single one of the D'Ysquiths – male, female, young and old – is played by the same actor. "If you have a talented actor getting killed over and over again," says director Tresnjak, who won a Tony for his work on the show, "then each murder is a reward, because he's going to come back as another delightful characterization." And, Freedman adds that each D'Ysquith is "loathsome in different ways, but in kind of the same way, in their attitude toward the little people, and their arrogance, which is silly. They're all silly people, too."

Tresnjak says all the musical's characters – even the seemingly nice ones – are "a little wicked." And the writers admit they took great pains to make their protagonist, Monty, who also romances two women in the show, sympathetic, despite his murderous proclivities. "He's an underdog," says Freedman, "not only did he grow up poor, but he was denied the kind of life that he should have been born into and should've had. I think there's a bit of fantasy or wish fulfillment, in seeing him be able to get revenge on the people who made it impossible for him to advance in the world." Tresnjak says "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."

A big part of the musical's appeal is its theatricality. There's a toy stage inside a larger proscenium, which constantly opens to reveal new two-dimensional settings for the murders (a parish church, a frozen lake, a garden, etc.); the ensemble of six play multiple roles; and the score has echoes of Gilbert and Sullivan, Lerner and Loewe and English music hall. "What we are, in a way, is a very low comedy in a very fancy box," says Lutvak. "There's all that faux classical music and it's all very proper and it's Edwardian England and the women are all

corseted and everything is buttoned up. But, in reality, it's a low comedy; it's a Bert Lahr, laugh-your-ass-off comedy.

And audiences of all ages have embraced *Gentleman's Guide*. Director Darko Tresnjak says, "It's attracting more and more young people. It seems to kind of have a cult status with many of them. And some of them are posting videos [of some of the songs] on YouTube!" The LA-based Robert Freedman says, when he visits New York, he frequently slips into the theater to catch the last fifteen minutes of the show. "By the end people are overwhelmed and thrilled and it's just so exciting," he says. "It's *the* thing about the show that's the most meaningful to me; feeling that from the audience and knowing that I've been a part of it, of a sharing experience like that. There's nothing like it in the world."