HEALING ARTS: MATERIA MEDICA

From Academic Medicine to Broadway

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In July 2010, my wife and I attended a performance of *Evita* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. A young man walked onto the stage, sat down, and started singing *Oh What a Circus*. After one verse, we looked at each other and said “Who is this guy?” Josh Young is an American musical theater actor who had been cast as Che after an extensive North American search. He has a booming voice and was perfect for the role. At the end of the performance, Josh was signing copies of his CD in the lobby of the theater, so we bought one and had a very brief chat. I gave him my card and we started to correspond by email. A few months later, he asked me to produce his second album. I had no idea what that meant but said “yes” right away. Over the course of the next 10 months, I learned all the steps involved in producing an album: song selection, hiring an orchestrator, laying down the instrumental tracks, then the vocal tracks, editing, mixing, mastering, getting the licenses, manufacturing the CDs, and electronic dissemination. It was a lot like doing a research project, lots of strategy, vision, creativity, and logistical problems that needed to be solved. As well, it required passion; we had to really want to do it. We were very proud of the result, and I played the tracks in various stages of production on my car stereo and office systems over and over again.

The next year, Josh was cast as Judas in the Stratford production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (JCS), which also starred Paul Nolan (Jesus) and Chilina Kennedy (Mary Magdalen). The production was a terrific success. Andrew Lloyd Weber came to see it and they decided to transfer the show to Broadway. Some plays had transferred from Stratford to Broadway before, but this was the first musical so it was a big deal. We became (and remain) good friends with the trio of actors, met the director of the show, and the next thing we knew I was a Producer of JCS on Broadway. (There was a group of producers; I wasn’t the only one.) There were lots of fun events that followed: opening night and the party afterwards, reading reviews, taking my college friends to the show, getting nominated as a producer for a Tony in the “best revival of a musical” category; Josh was nominated for best featured actor in a musical (a very big deal), and going to the Tony ceremony. Neither Josh nor I won a Tony, and the show only stayed open for 4 months. We lost all the money we invested.

But that’s theater—most shows do not recoup their investment and many make no money at all. Lesson learned.

A byproduct of producing one show is that I got to meet producers of other shows. So next came pitches to produce or invest again. My background in economics helped me to understand proposed budgets for shows: to figure out which were good deals and which were not. I invested in several: *Annie*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Matilda*, and *Hughie*; made money on some; lost on others. I turned down about 10 other shows that I did not think would work out financially or artistically. But in each case, I worked with some excellent lead producers who taught me a lot. I also produced a second album with Adam Jacobs who originated the role of Aladdin, all Alan Menken songs.

After JCS, Josh went out to Seattle to do a “reading” of a musical in development and called me to say that I would really like the lead producers of that show. So, I flew to Seattle and met the Junk Yard Dogs—Kenny, Marleen, Randy, and Sue. They were kind enough to spend time with me, tell me about their previous shows (*Memphis* won the Tony for best musical in 2010), and talked about their passion for theater and their approach to producing. We kept in touch and in August 2014, they invited me back to Seattle for a reading of a new show about Newfoundland. *Come From Away* is the story about the 6500 passengers who were stranded in Gander, Newfoundland, on September 11, 2001, when the USA closed its airspace. About 9000 residents of Gander and surrounding towns looked after these people (known in Newfoundland as “come from aways,” hence the title) for 5 days. Now, the idea of writing a musical about 9/11 sounds as bizarre as the famous *Springtime for Hitler*, but it is really a story about the human kindness shown to strangers in a fragile and scary time—sounds familiar? The show had a long development route through 3 US cities and Toronto before it opened on Broadway on February 18, 2017. My wife and I signed on as Producers in 2015. Perhaps the highlight of the experience for me was attending 2 performances of the show in the hockey arena in Gander and seeing the reaction of 5000 local people (and several of the real come from aways). It’s not very often that a show is performed in the location where the story took place in front of the people it is about. They loved it.

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The rest is history; we are a big hit on Broadway (nominated for another Tony, but lost again) and opened in 4 other places around the world. We did win an Olivier Award for best musical in London in 2019 (the statue is still on its way from London). My wife and I are very proud to be producers of such are heartwarming show.

So why did I do this? What do I get out of it? My wife and I have always been musical theater lovers. Not all productions work, but when they do it is magic. And for me, it provides a wonderful balance to the clinical work I and we all do as general internists, taking care of people who are suffering terribly and tragically with severe illness. It's actually not that much different from research. I love seeing a show through the various stages of evolution from ideas, to workshops and small readings, to early productions and beyond. We have met some wonderful people—actors, directors, producers, musicians—and have made lifelong friends. I admire their passion for what they do; their rewards are hardly financial most of the time. I would say it was a complete accident that this happened, but that is not very different than a lot of the things I have done in life. If I keep an open mind and go with what sounds like, it might be fun; well that's worked out for me before.

Many people in the medical community have asked me: How did you ever get into Broadway producing? Well, now you have the answer.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards:

Conflict of Interest: The author is the producer of *Come From Away* and the 2 albums he mentions in this story.

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