The Marvelous Wonderettes

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretive articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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The Marvelous Wonderettes

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Roger Bean, writer and director of The Marvelous Wonderettes, has spent nearly his entire life in the theatre. Now a director, creator, writer, and producer, he is primarily known for turning golden oldies into entertaining jukebox musicals.

He was born March 20, 1962, to Ron and Lois Bean and was raised in Seattle along with his three siblings. He grew up as part of a family who loved music and the arts. When he was eight, his mother took him to drama school, where “the theatre grabbed him,” she once said. “I think he knew deep down since he was little what he wanted to do” (Goff, Nadine, “Madison Rep goes back in time with ‘The Marvelous Wonderettes’” [Wisconsin State Journal, July 26, 2002]). He credits his mother for his musical talent and the primary influence on his career choice.

He also credits his mother for inspiring his love of music from the ’50s and ’60s and, in particular, girl group music. She was part of a singing group in high school as well as being a varsity song leader, and he recalls her constantly singing around the house when he was growing up.

Bean’s first experience writing music was also with his mother. He reminisces that during his youth they would rewrite lyrics to popular and Broadway songs that they would include in plays and melodramas for church productions. “So I was writing jukebox musicals when I was a teenager,” he said. “I had no idea it would turn into a career so many years later” (Personal interview, January 31, 2013).

“So I blame and give credit to my mother for everything,” he added (Bean, Roger, “My Wonderettes World” [Broadway.com, Sept. 23, 2008]).

He credits his father for inspiring his sense of humor and his belief that he could do anything he set his mind to. His father was an entrepreneur who ran his own restaurant company, and thus Bean grew up thinking he, too, would someday be his own boss. “I guess that’s why I became a director, and a writer, and now run my own company” (personal interview).

After high school, Bean attended various colleges: BYU-Hawaii, Brigham Young University, and University of Texas-Austin. Ultimately he completed his theatre degree at Southern Utah State College (now Southern Utah University) in Cedar City where he had a theatre assistantship. He went on to get his master of fine arts degree with a double emphasis in theatre administration and directing from Wayne State University in Detroit.

“My graduate school was formative because it was truly sink or swim—we had to learn by doing, and all of the graduate students were essentially running a major repertory theatre. I just had to jump in and do it,” he said (personal interview).

In 1988, he returned to Cedar City as the associate marketing director for the Utah Shakespeare Festival. He worked in this position for a couple of years before he became the director of marketing and public relations.

“It was great to have a job so quickly after graduate school. . . . Utah Shakes helped me get ready for New York City” (personal interview).

He left Utah for the Big Apple in 1992 and immediately began working at Circle Rep, a major off-Broadway theatre. He also worked as a press agent for Jeffrey Richards in New York City. After a few years he realized he wanted to get back to directing, something he had not done since going to school and had only done minimally while working at the Festival.

The timing could not have been better. The Festival invited Bean to direct A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum in 1995, followed by The Mikado in 1996.
also directed My Fair Lady for Skylight Opera Theatre (now Skylight Music Theatre) in Milwaukee during this time.

While in Milwaukee, he met with the artistic staff from Milwaukee Rep to inquire about directing there, and they suggested he submit an idea for a show that would work in their cabaret performance space. After seeing a show there, he realized that the show that would fit the best would essentially be like what he had done with his mother growing up: taking existing songs and piecing them together with a storyline. “So I became a playwright really to give myself more directing work,” Bean admitted (personal interview).

Interesting to note that as he began writing his first new musical, Don’t Touch That Dial! he had in mind the “crazy talent” of someone with whom he had worked in Cedar City: the one and only Brian Vaughn (now artistic director at the Festival).

The show, which was part of Milwaukee Rep’s 1997-98 season, was a big hit, and they wanted another show right away. At the time he was visiting his family in Seattle and he happened to have a conversation with his mother about her time in high school as a song leader and a member of a singing trio. And “that’s . . . where the germ of the idea came from” for his next hit, The Marvelous Wonderettes (Matsuda, Donnie, “Mr. Brand Man” [ArtsN Fashion Magazine, February 2012]).

He used the inspiration from his mother as a starting point:
“And so it became the perfect creative inspiration for my new show . . . High school song leaders, best friends, singing at the prom for their friends and boyfriends—what would happen to them? How would the songs they sing influence their lives? Could pop songs from the ‘50s and ‘60s actually become book songs just like in a real musical? That’s how The Marvelous Wonderettes came into being” (Calamia, Donald V, “A Few Minutes with Roger Bean, creator of The Marvelous Wonderettes” [www.encoremichigan.com]).

The first version, a one-act, took about nine months to write: six months spent just listening to music, narrowing down the songs to use, and then three more months to put it all together. It premiered at Milwaukee Rep in 1999.

In 2001 The Marvelous Wonderettes came back as an expanded two-act version at Milwaukee Rep, featuring Bets Malone as Suzy, a role that Bean wrote with her in mind. Since then, Bets has performed in numerous productions of the show all across the country, including an award-winning Los Angeles production in 2006, an off-Broadway production in 2008, and an original cast recording.

The Marvelous Wonderettes has been described as a “cotton candy-colored non-stop pop musical” and has garnered a huge fan base (Calamia). Unfortunately, one of Bean’s biggest fans, his mother, never got to see the show before she passed away in 2004.

Bean continued to write new musicals, most of which premiered at Milwaukee Rep. “They’ve been a great artistic home and helped me create a nice catalogue of work” (Melville, Lee, “Roger Bean’s ‘Dream’ comes true” [LA Stage Times, August 6, 2009]).

That “catalogue of work” includes That’s Amoré, Route 66, Beach Blanket Bash!, Winter Wonderettes, Honky Tonk Laundry, The Andrews Brothers, Why Do Fools Fall in Love?, and Life Could Be a Dream.

As the success and popularity of his shows increased, Bean felt the need to create his own licensing company, Steele Spring Theatrical Licensing. The full-time staff now handles all of the licensing of The Marvelous Wonderettes and a few of his other shows for theatres all over the country. This allows Bean the flexibility to travel in order to direct or remount shows regionally, and, if he’s lucky, to find time to write new shows.

In addition to Milwaukee Rep, his work as a director has been on stages nationwide, including The Laguna Playhouse, Ogunquit Playhouse, Delaware Theatre Company, San

Bean is a member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers and the Dramatists Guild. He lives in Los Angeles with his partner of twelve years, Perry Steele Patton. When asked about his future projects, he says his plate is full, but gives no further details because “I always hate to jinx them” (personal interview). And as far as his writing goes, he says: “Mostly, I try to write things that I think my parents would enjoy” (Thielman, Sam, “Wandering wonder of stage” [Variety, June 26, 2009].

**Synopsis: The Marvelous Wonderettes**

It is the 1958 Springfield High School senior prom, and four teenage girls who are the school’s “trophy-winning” song leaders are asked to step in as the entertainment. They are replacing the boys’ glee club, the Crooning Crab Cakes, whose lead singer was caught smoking behind the girls’ locker room and suspended from school.

As they sing and dance to popular songs of the 1950s, tension between two of the girls, Betty Jean and Cindy Lou, increases. They fight about a boy, but eventually make-up as the other girls, Missy and Suzy, also sing about their loves. Act One culminates with the vote for the “Queen of Your Dreams,” the prom queen.

Act Two takes place ten years later, at the girls’ ten year reunion. The girls have again been asked to provide the entertainment. Suzy, Missy, and Betty Jean stayed in Springfield after high school, while Cindy Lou went to Hollywood before coming back to Springfield. Each of the girls tells the story of the man in her life and what has happened since high school. The evening ends as magically as it began.

**Characters: The Marvelous Wonderettes**

Betty Jean: The practical joker of the group, Betty Jean struggles with her relationships with her boyfriend (Act One) and husband (Act Two).

Cindy Lou: The flirt and catty girl of the group, Cindy Lou very much wants to win prom queen and believes the world revolves around her. She goes through a bit of a journey in Act Two.

Missy: The bossy girl of the group, Missy likes to control things; but she is also a bit socially awkward and shy about her secret crush.

Suzy: The happy-go-lucky one of the group, Suzy is positive but also a little on the ditzy side. She is continuously chewing bubble gum.
The Marvelous Wonderettes:
Waxing Nostalgic
By Don Leavitt

Not long ago, a friend asked me: if my life had a soundtrack, what songs would be included? It is an interesting question, and not as easy to answer as you might think. Anyone who knows me well would likely assume that my life’s soundtrack would be full of music from the James Bond movies—I am a self-confessed Bond nut, and the fact that I have every soundtrack to every movie (and listen to them regularly) would be an obvious tip-off. But if Bond music is excluded, it’s a challenge to identify the songs that mean the most to me.

There are many songs which, when I hear them, can immediately take me back to specific moments in my life—my first date or my first kiss; my first big role in a play; my wedding and the births of my children; even funerals and the loss of people close to me. When I hear Pink Floyd’s “The Wall,” for example, I immediately think of riding the bus in sixth grade to ice skating lessons; “Faithfully” by Journey invariably reminds me of the night in seventh grade when I finally worked up enough courage to hold a certain girl's hand. Paul Simon’s “Slip Slidin’ Away” reminds me of my mother, while just about any song by Depeche Mode reminds me of things I’d rather my mother not know about! Every moment of my life, it seems, can be summed up by the song I hear in my head when I think about it.

Such is the power of nostalgia, that uniquely human ability to transport one’s mind to a previous time or place. Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defines nostalgia as “a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one’s life; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time.” Studies have shown that some of the strongest triggers of nostalgia include the senses of smell, touch and sound: few things have the power to transport us backwards in time like a strong scent, a pleasant embrace, or a good song.

It has been suggested that most people tend to gravitate to the music they listened to as teenagers and young adults and that the music from this era defines them for the rest of their lives. I don't know if this is true, but I find it interesting that, while I genuinely like the music from many different eras, the music that feels most like me comes from the ’80s and ’90s. My parents say the same thing about the ’60s; most of my siblings, friends, and acquaintances agree. It’s a small wonder, then, that one era music makes us most nostalgic for is high school.

This is the central conceit of The Marvelous Wonderettes, a musical that seems to exist for the sole purpose of celebrating nostalgia. The play transports us to 1958 and the senior prom at Springfield High School, where four girls—best friends and members of the school’s song leader squad—are asked to perform for their peers as the Wonderettes. Through the course of the play, the foursome performs a number of standard hits from the ’50s, including songs like “Mr. Sandman,” “Lollipop,” “Secret Love” and “Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me,” all while dealing with the ups and downs of the social and interpersonal relationships that seem, oh, so important in high school. The play premiered as a one-act production at Milwaukee Rep in 1999 and was re-introduced in its current two-act form in 2001.

Playwright Roger Bean, creator of the Wonderettes and directing alum of the Utah Shakespeare Festival, is no stranger to nostalgia, having penned eleven musicals that, according to his official biography, “re-imagine eras of American music through the creative use of established and lesser-known radio, phonograph, and jukebox hits.” What’s more, Bean is completely unapologetic when asked about the nostalgic tone that pervades his work. “I always
knew it hit a sweet spot in people's memories but of course had no idea how large the fan base would become,” Bean told Arts N Fashion Magazine. “It's a very special and unique show, and I feel very blessed to see so many people get tickled and moved by [it]” (www.rogerbean.com/Roger_Bean/Articles.html).

The inspiration for The Marvelous Wonderettes began in childhood, when Bean would listen to his mother sing. “When I was growing up, my mother was always singing around the house,” Bean writes. “Lots of '50s and '60s girl group stuff. So the popular music from these eras is deep in my consciousness” (Roger Bean: My Wonderettes World, Broadway.com, September 23, 2008). Years later, Bean learned his mother had been a song leader in high school and that she had performed as part of a singing trio. “As I started thinking about . . . my mother’s particular circumstances of being ‘expected’ to become a homemaker, I got a little angry,” writes Bean. “Angry that she hadn't gotten the chance to go on and do something she had clearly loved: singing.”

The very genesis of The Marvelous Wonderettes, then, is steeped in nostalgia, serving not only as a tribute to Bean's mother and the era of music that she loved, but also as a vehicle for that most nostalgic of questions, “what if?” Curious to know what a song leader was and how it differed from a cheerleader; curious, too, to know if his mother could have been successful as a singer, Bean set out to see if he could transform the music his mother loved into the book for a musical. “This was the perfect creative idea for my second show at Milwaukee Rep,” Bean writes. “High school song leaders, best friends, singing at the prom for their friends and boyfriends—what would happen to them? How would the songs they sing influence their lives?”

From all appearances, Bean's experiment in nostalgia has been successful. After opening for an extended run at Milwaukee Rep in 2001, The Marvelous Wonderettes opened in Los Angeles at the El Portal Forum Theatre in 2006 and then opened off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre in New York in 2008. The play has also been produced at numerous regional and community theatres, has spawned a sequel and a spin-off, and has won several awards, including the 2007 Los Angeles Ovation Award for Best Musical.

Bean acknowledges the nostalgic theme that runs through each of his musicals. “I’ve been told I wear my heart on my sleeve in my shows,” he told Arts N Fashion Magazine. But he also recognizes the power that nostalgia can have to lift and transport audiences. In the Broadway.com piece, he writes, “We seemed to be striking a chord with audiences, especially as people were looking back and remembering seemingly simpler times in the aftermath of horrible tragedies.” That’s because there is safety in nostalgia—an escape to a happier place and time that resonates with all people. We long for the familiar, the safe, the comfortable, particularly in times of hardship or trial. “I love hearing an audience ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ in recognition when a song they know begins,” Bean has said (Leszczewicz, Heather, Bean’s Milwaukee Originals Go Places [OnMilwaukee.com, November 9, 2006]).

Of course, at the heart of his plays lie the things for which Bean himself waxes nostalgic. “My mother never did get to see The Marvelous Wonderettes before she passed away a few years ago,” Bean wrote for Broadway.com. Bean has credited his parents for his talent (mother for music and father for humor) and is not shy about admitting who inspires him. “Mostly, I try to write things that I think my parents would enjoy,” he says (Thielman, Sam, Wandering wonder of stage [Variety, June 26, 2009]).