Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Murder for Two
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 interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: John Wascavage (left) as The Suspects and Paul Helm as Marcus Moscowicz in Murder for Two, 2016.
Murder for Two

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Joe Kinosian and Kellen Blair: Creators of *Murder for Two*

By Marlo Ihler

“What if the Marx Brothers performed a piece by Agatha Christie—wouldn’t that be fun?”

*Murder for Two,* created by Joe Kinosian and Kellen Blair, has been called a mix between Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes, Clue, the Marx Brothers, and something the New York Times called “Ingenious!” (www.thebroadwayblog.com/2014/05/19/10518-joe-kinosian-murder-for-two).

This zany, romp of a murder mystery premiered in 2013 on off-Broadway, and during its young life has already won numerous awards as well as the attention of theatres across the country. Its writers, who were fresh out of college when they wrote it, combined their many talents as well as their love of film and musical theatre to create a show where one actor plays the detective and the other actor plays all the suspects.

So, who are Joe Kinosian and Kellen Blair and how did they come to work together? And where did the idea for this crazy show come from?

Joe Kinosian (book and music) grew up near Milwaukee. He started playing the piano at age five and soon realized how much he enjoyed recreating his favorite songs on the piano. As a child, he also loved to draw, and, as he got older, his love of musical theatre increased. He would spend entire paychecks on piano-vocal scores to study them, and developed an interest in writing his own.

He attended the Milwaukee High School of the Arts, followed by college at Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, where he studied film and television production. He credits his professor Andrew Levine as instrumental (no pun intended) in encouraging him to write musical theatre and introducing him to his first professional contacts (Personal Interview, January 24, 2016).

Following college, he moved to New York City, and, for a short time, he worked in film until, as he puts it “I crashed a truck as a PA and that was my signal that I wasn’t cut out for the film world” (Showbiz U, www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6RY0ivrUAQ).

Kellen Blair (book and lyrics) is originally from Seattle and also attended film school, though he went to Chapman University in southern California. He studied to be a film writer and director. He spent a couple of years in Los Angeles, trying his hand at film but eventually he moved to New York City after realizing film was not actually his passion.

“I’d always loved musical theatre. It’s all I’d ever listened to. It’s all I ever wanted to do,” says Kellen. “And yet, it never occurred to me that that was an actual option in terms of career pursuit. And yet, for some reason, film seemed like the safe choice,” he jokes (Showbiz U).

Both Joe and Kellen applied for the BMI Musical Theater Writing workshop in New York City, where they met in 2008. They were paired up to work on a songwriting assignment, at which, in Kellen’s words, they did not exactly succeed (Showbiz U).

Despite the fact they failed the assignment, Kellen says it was a bonding experience for them and it “was a good time and we worked well together” (www.27east.com/news/article.cfm/sag-Harbon/256177/musical-comedy-makes-its-way-through-the-maze-to-Buy-Street). After a second assignment together, they realized their similar tastes and sensibilities made for great collaboration.
Following their first year at BMI, knowing that during the second they would be asked to choose a partner with whom they would work on a project, Joe and Kellen decided to continue their partnership and began hashing out ideas for a full-book musical. They knew that their “first show as two nobody-writers was never going to be a huge, expensive, Broadway spectacle.” So they gave themselves a challenge: “How much could we do with absolutely nothing?” (www.backstage.com/advice-for-actors/first-person/humble-apology-actors-creators-murder-two).

They took stock of their assets: Joe was a fantastic piano-playing, singer-actor-composer, and Kellen was a great lyricist. They made the smart choice to write something “small and easy to produce ourselves,” “something we could produce at the drop of a hat” and use to “entertain a few friends.” It would also be something that could be performed “at any given New York cabaret space whenever we needed to reaffirm the fact that we were real writers,” says the pair (Blair and Kinosian, Murder for Two, 2014, p. vii).

The concept of a musical murder mystery was among the early list of ideas. They both liked Agatha Christie and the way the Marx Brothers incorporated music into their comedy. They then decided to limit the cast to two actors, one who would play the detective and one who would play all the suspects. The structure of a murder mystery seemed great for a first show because they knew the detective would have to interview the different suspects, which allowed for a straightforward outline from the very beginning (www.theplaybillcollector.com/interviews/interview-with-murder-for-two-writer-kellen-blair).

Joe and Kellen spent the next three months writing the first draft of Murder for Two. The book was very collaborative between them; Joe wrote and recorded the music for Kellen who then wrote the lyrics. It follows a very “formulaic three-act screenplay structure,” says the former film students (Showbiz U).

The first reading of Murder for Two was for a group of friends in 2009. As fortune had it, a theatre producer who was also in attendance liked it; and from there the show went into developmental productions in New York and California. Its world premiere was at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre in 2011 where it was extended four times due to popular demand. It made its off-Broadway debut at Second Stage Theatre Uptown in 2013 before it transferred to a commercial off-Broadway run at New World Stages where it closed June 2014. From there it went to its regional premiere at Pittsburgh CLO in October 2014 and is currently touring throughout the country (www.kinosianandblair.com).

As Murder for Two skyrocketed in popularity, it received numerous awards, such as Chicago’s Joseph Jefferson Award for the Best New Musical in 2011 and the ASCAP Foundation Mary Rodgers/Lorenz Hart Award in 2013. It was also a nominee for a Drama Desk Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, a Drama League Award, and a Lucille Lortel Award (www.thebroadwayblog.com/2014/05/19/10518-joe-kinosian-murder-for-two).

Joe and Kellen continue their writing partnership today. As of press time, they are working on several new musicals. Their work has been performed on Broadway, at the Kennedy Center, and in theatres across the country, where audiences continue to be delighted by this hilarious, fast-paced, highly theatrical, musically demanding gem.
Murder for Two: Characters

Murder for Two is performed by two piano-playing actors. One actor portrays:
Marcus—
MARCUS MOSCOWICZ: An ambitious young officer
(He also provides voices for two characters in flashback.)
THE CHIEF: Marcus’s grizzled boss
VANESSA: Marcus’s former partner

The other actor portrays:
The Suspects—
DAHLIA WHITNEY: The victim’s loopy widow
MURRAY AND BARB FLANDON: The Whitney’s bickering neighbors
STEPH WHITNEY: An overeager grad student
BARRETTE LEWIS: A self-incriminating ballerina
DR. GRIFF: A friendly local psychiatrist
TIMMY, YONKERS, AND SKID: Members of an antiquated boys’ choir
HENRY VIVALDI: A late arrival

The final character is Officer Lou, who isn’t played by an actor. Marcus and the suspects address him as needed. (From Kinosian and Blair. Murder for Two. 2014)
Murder for Two: Synopsis

Officer Marcus Moscowicz is a small town policeman with dreams of making it to detective. One fateful night, shots ring out at the surprise birthday party of Great American Novelist Arthur Whitney and the writer is killed . . . fatally. With the nearest detective an hour away, Marcus jumps at the chance to prove his sleuthing skills—with the help of his silent partner, Lou. But whodunit? Did Dahlia Whitney, Arthur’s scene-stealing wife, give him a big finish? Is Barrette Lewis, the prima ballerina, the prime suspect? Did Dr. Griff, the overly friendly psychiatrist, make a frenemy? Marcus has only a short amount of time to find the killer and make his name before the real detective arrives . . . and the ice cream melts! (From www.murderfortwo.com/about.)
Murder for Two or Is Death by Laughter Even Possible?

By Ryan David Paul

If you have been to the theatre in the last twenty years, then I am sure you are familiar with the announcement asking you to turn off all your mobile devices. Popular belief is that we silence our phones in order to not disturb the actors and our fellow audience members, and this is true, to a certain extent. More importantly, the performers on stage want us to be present in the moment; they want us as an audience to join them on the journey. After all, they do this multiple times a week, but for many, it is new and exciting. Most live theatre is a dialogue between you, sitting in the dark, and those storytellers on stage. This is important to remember, specifically as you embark on the ride that is Murder for Two.

Here is the basic idea “Officer Marcus Moscowicz is a small town policeman with dreams of making it to detective. One fateful night, shots ring out at the surprise birthday party of Great American Novelist Arthur Whitney and the writer is killed . . . fatally. With the nearest detective an hour away, Marcus jumps at the chance to prove his sleuthing skills—with the help of his silent partner, Lou. But whodunit? Did Dahlia Whitney, Arthur’s scene-stealing wife, give him a big finish? Is Barrette Lewis, the prima ballerina, the prime suspect? Did Dr. Griff, the overly-friendly psychiatrist, make a frenemy? Marcus has only a short amount of time to find the killer and make his name before the real detective arrives . . . and the ice cream melts!” (http://murderfortwomusical.com/about/). The catch is, there are only two actors on stage, one investigating the crime, and the other playing all the suspects, and both playing the piano.

Directing this madcap adventure for the Utah Shakespeare Festival, a regional premiere by the way, is Brad Carroll whose most recent Festival credits include South Pacific, Into the Woods, and Anything Goes. Carroll describes Murder for Two as “part Murder Mystery, part Marx Brothers’ movie and part old-fashioned musical. Though set in ‘present day’ it takes place in ‘an old isolated mansion’ in New England that feels like a real throwback to earlier, and somewhat romanticized days of yore—buying us all the desired trappings of ‘then’ juxtaposed with cell phone communication and contemporary references of ‘now’” (Director’s Notes, Utah Shakespeare Festival).

Murder for Two came from the minds of Joe Kinosian and Kellen Blair who met at a BMI musical workshop in 2008 where they were randomly paired up to work on a project. While the project they were assigned did not go so well, they both enjoyed the collaboration and began working on ideas for new musicals. In an interview for The Playbill Collector, Kellen Blair stated that he and Kinosian, when thinking about a new project asked themselves, “what do we have that might give us an edge?” And the answer, frankly, was Joe. He’s an amazing piano-playing-singer-actor and we knew we could use that to our advantage. Since we had Joe there from the very beginning, we were able to show producers exactly what the show was going to be from the first reading. We knew that was a large asset. We thought about what we both liked which was Agatha Christie and the Marx Brothers. The way that they incorporated music to their comedy was exciting. The structure of a murder mystery seemed great for a first show because we knew the detective would have to interview the different suspects, which gave us a pretty straightforward outline from the very beginning” (http://theplaybillcollector.com/interviews/interview-with-murder-for-two-writer-kellen-blair).

After some early workshops, the musical premiered at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre and ran for seven months before making the leap to off-Broadway and now throughout the country.

For Director Carroll, while the uniquely crafted production creates interest, it is the story that drives this play with music forward. Murder for Two “is a Murder Mystery that happens to develop...
into a tour-de-force performance for two actors, not the other way around. Story, character, and moment-to-moment dramatic stakes are what keep us ‘in the car’ during this wild and hilarious ride. Otherwise it can quickly become two guys running around the stage doing funny voices. The story is the thing; the hijinx and hilarity are the result and the reward.” (Director’s Notes). Bruce C. Lee, publications manager for the Utah Shakespeare Festival, adds that for this production, “the theatrical experience itself will be very important, as will imagination and the willing suspension of disbelief. But it will mainly be hilarious.”

In a 2014 interview, Joe Kinosian, was asked what message he hoped the audience would take home from Murder for Two. He responded, “Because the physical world of Murder for Two is largely invented by the two actors, I guess there is an implied message of ‘hey, we can put on a show by ourselves!’ It’s very collaborative, with the two actors pulling together to make the show happen, while two characters pull together to solve the crime, and if there’s any real-life parallel to that message, it’s how my writing partner, Kellen Blair, and I have definitely found we work better together than apart” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-groner/it-takes-two-a-short-intere_b_4674178.html).

Collaboration is key in Murder for Two, not only in the chemistry that is essential for the two performers and the timing that is necessary for a show like this to be successful, but the interaction with the audience as well. This production grabs hold of the audience and brings them into the story, in some cases, becoming a character themselves. Director Brad Carroll wants the audience members to be invited into this crazy world and realize that their imagination and participation is key to the play’s success. The reward for those theatregoers who are willing to accept this invitation, according to Carroll, “is a delightful, surprising, high energy, side-splittingly funny time in the theatre” (Directors Notes).

Murder for Two is one of the first plays to be produced in the brand new Eileen and Allen Anes Studio Theatre. This amazing space will allow opportunities previously unavailable to the Utah Shakespeare Festival audiences for intimate evenings of theatre. Murder for Two is bred for a space like this. The 2016 season is a banner year for the Festival, with the inauguration of new theaters, upgraded amenities, and innovative productions. This is a season not to be missed and Murder for Two is a play to die for, (See what I did there.) Just remember to read the Playbill, applaud for the actors and please, silence your phone, we need to talk to you.