Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical
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: Jered Tanner (left) as Max Garber and Steven Stein-Grainger as Tito Merelli in the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s 2007 world-premiere production of Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical.
Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical

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Synopsis: Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical

It is the biggest night in the history of the Cleveland Grand Opera Company. The world-famous tenor, Tito Merelli, “Il Stupendo,” is to perform his greatest role, Otello, at the ten-year anniversary gala season opener. Henry Saunders, the opera’s executive director, has high hopes that Merelli’s performance will put Cleveland on the operatic map. However, at the final dress rehearsal of Otello, Merelli is nowhere to be found, Saunders is in a panic, and, along with Max Garber, Saunders’s personal assistant, they scramble to figure out what to do (“Where the Hell Is Merelli?”).

Meanwhile, Maggie Saunders, Henry’s daughter, is making preparations for Merelli’s arrival. She has transformed the neighboring Cleveland Hotel lobby (the place set for the gala reception) into a shrine to the opera star. Max enters and insists Maggie shouldn’t get her hopes up, that Merelli might not show. Maggie believes otherwise and has additional plans concerning Merelli (“I Need a Fling”).

Saunders rushes in and presses Max on an alternate plan. To make matters worse, they receive news that the President and Mrs. Roosevelt will be in attendance at the evening’s gala. Desperately, Saunders turns to Max for an idea. Max, who fancies he is something of an opera singer himself, offers a solution (“How ’bout Me?”). In the middle of the song, Tito Merelli and his volatile wife, Maria, enter incognito. After the song Saunders and Max are told of the Merelli’s arrival and rush to make them welcome.

Fifteen floors above, in the Cleveland Hotel’s penthouse suite, the hotel staff makes final preparations for a royal welcome (“For the Love of Opera”). However, once the Merelli’s arrive at their suite, it becomes painfully clear that Tito is in shaky shape to perform. He is suffering from a terrible stomachache and is at odds with his wife over his preoccupation with women. Maria storms off into the bedroom. Saunders exits to ready the opera company and guild for “Il Stupendo’s performance. Tito enters the bedroom to comfort his wife, but his efforts are to no avail (“I Would Choose You All Over Again”).

After yet another row with Maria, Tito returns to the sitting room. Now alone, Max and Tito share a drink and come together to form a common bond of admiration, friendship, and respect (“Be Yourself”). Meanwhile, Tito’s wife is busily composing a note resolving to leave her husband for good, and, when she finds Maggie hiding in the bedroom closet desperate to meet Tito, she angrily departs.

Soon, Tito, somewhat dazed after ingesting a triple dose of tranquilizers, which he has unwittingly mixed with a large amount of Chianti, finds Maria’s note and threatens to kill himself. His tirade is finally calmed by Max who sings him tenderly to sleep with the notion that Maria will be “Back before You Know It.”

Tito passes out, and when Max tries to rouse him, Tito appears to be lifeless. Max comes to the conclusion that Tito is dead! When Maria’s “Dear John” letter is mistaken for a suicide note, Max and Saunders realize the company stands to lose $50,000 in ticket sales unless it can find a way for the “dead” singer to deliver the performance of his life (“Holy $#@!!”).

From here on, the play unfolds into a riotous and unpredictable explosion of mistaken identities and renewed love! Finally, at show’s end, everyone is filled with a sense that they just might get the thing each of them desires, and that the Cleveland Grand Opera Company’s future will be a bright one (“Lend Me a Tenor Reprise”).
Characters: *Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical*

**Henry Saunders:** Executive director of the Cleveland Grand Opera House, Saunders is a man who gets things done, one way or another.

**Max Garber:** Assistant to Saunders, and in love with Saunders’s daughter Maggie, Max has much more talent than is apparent.

**Diana Bateman:** Diva of the Cleveland Opera House, Diana has a “thing” for the great Il Stupendo, Tito Merelli.

**Maggie Saunders:** Saunders’s daughter, Maggie is attracted to Max, but isn’t sure she is love. She, instead, says she needs “a fling.”

**Albert Rupp:** The tenor’s understudy who moonlights as a bellhop.

**Maria Merelli:** Wife to Tito, Maria is suspicious of her husband’s fidelity; still, she can’t give him up.

**Tito Merelli:** “Il Stupendo,” a world-famous opera star.
The Playwrights: Peter Sham, Brad Carroll, and Ken Ludwig

By Rachelle Hughes
From Insights, 2007

Friendship, creativity, and trust between original playwright Ken Ludwig and Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical co-creators—librettist Peter Sham and composer Brad Carroll—launched the 2007 Utah Shakespeare Festival's world premiere of the first musical based on Ken Ludwig's hit Broadway comedy, Lend Me a Tenor.

*Lend Me A Tenor is the most produced contemporary comedy in the world,*” said Sham. So it was an enormous surprise to the Sham and Carroll team that in the years since its debut on Broadway they were the first to approach Ludwig about doing a musical adaptation of this well-loved play.

Ken Ludwig was born in York, Pennsylvania and started his education at Haverford College where he wrote his first theatrical works produced before a theatrical audience. But Ludwig then headed in a non-theatrical direction and attended Harvard Law School where he earned his J.D and Cambridge University where he finished his law education. He practiced law for a time and still remains “Of Council” at the firm of Steptoe and Johnson. Ludwig did not ignore his love of theatre during his education and he studied both Shakespeare and musical theatre. One of his mentors includes Leonard Bernstein (“Ken Ludwig,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Ludwig, February 3, 2007).

Deciding to focus his energy on theatre paid off for Ludwig. As Sham says, “He’s one of the really big playwrights.” His works which have received international acclaim and a bevy of awards, including Tony awards, the Laurence Olivier award, two Helen Hayes awards, Drama Desks Awards, and the Outer Critics’ Circle Award include Crazy for You, Moon over Buffalo, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Leading Ladies, Be My Baby, Shakespeare in Hollywood (commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company), and Treasure Island. For television, he co-wrote the 1990 Kennedy Honors for CBS and a television pilot for Carol Channing. For film he wrote All Shook Up for Touchstone Pictures and Frank Oz. His most recent project is a stage adaptation of the George and Ira Gershwin film An American in Paris, which he is working on now. Ludwig lives in Washington D.C. with his wife Adrienne George and his two young children. Ludwig met Sham for the first time when Sham invited him to a production of Lend Me a Tenor at the Eichelberger Performing Arts Center in Hanover, Pennsylvania, where Sham was the artistic director. That invitation five years ago was the beginning of a friendship that endures today.

In 2004, Sham and Carroll became collaborators for the first time when they conceived the idea of *A Christmas Carol: On the Air* in the most unlikely of places, the Festival parking lot. They pitched their idea to the Festival producers who had been looking for a way to expand into the holiday season. “From the first day we pitched the idea to the opening night was ten weeks in developing the piece” said Carroll. “That first year it hit some nerve in the community. Now people come from all over to see the show.”

The success of *A Christmas Carol: On the Air* created the foundation for what would become the beginning of what Carroll and Sham see as a lifelong collaboration on other projects. But Carroll and Sham had cemented their friendship long before they started creating projects together. They first worked together on the 2002 Festival production of Man of La Mancha directed by Carroll. Sham was an actor in the play.
Carroll explains they “quickly became fast friends because we have the same sense of humor, irony, and many other things.”

Sham is quick to add they also have the “same sense of gossip.” Sham also points out that they make such an excellent team because they are honest with each other and they are not afraid to bruise each other’s egos. “With us the project is always the most important thing. It’s all about the play,” he said.

So when the talented pair and the Festival to write and produce a musical to premiere at the Festival they were anxious to work together on a new project. When Sham told Carroll he was going to call his friend Ken Ludwig and ask if they could revamp his famous Lend Me a Tenor into a musical, Carroll said he thought his partner was crazy. The next day Ludwig e-mailed him back with the unexpected answer, “Hmm! Never thought about it.” Ludwig e-mailed them back within the next couple of days and said “Let’s do it.”

“What we are really excited about is that he gave us free reign.” Ludwig once told Sham that because of its financial success he never really had to work again after Lend Me a Tenor. Although, Ludwig refuses to rest on his laurels, Lend Me a Tenor has been his greatest success. And yet, he told Carroll and Sham they could do whatever they wanted with the new musical.

“When someone gives you that luxury, you honor the work even more,” said Sham. “He trusted us when he didn’t really have any reason to trust us except for friendship. That really says what kind of a person he is.”

In 2004 the Carroll/Sham team began working on the project which they presented as a staged reading in May 2006 at the Festival. The initial readings have already received rave reviews including support from Ludwig, who says, “The music is terrific. The lyrics are fabulous. [Peter and Brad] have done a most incredible job. This is first rate—home run.”

Sham and Carroll are already brainstorming for future projects. And although they make a great team, they have their own personal achievements that have brought them to their recent run of success.

Carroll is the composer/arranger of the new opera-theatre piece, Cio Cio San, as well as the author/composer of The Emperor’s New Clothes commissioned for Shakespeare Santa Cruz in 2003. His other produced musicals include Across the River, Togetherness, Christmas Is . . . A Musical Memory, and a new musical treatment of Robin Hood. Carroll has created musical scores for dramatic productions including Cyrano de Bergerac, King Lear, As You Like It, Death of A Salesman, and To Kill a Mockingbird. He has worked as a writer, director, and musical arranger for Walt Disney Entertainment, and his arrangements/orchestrations have been performed by the San Francisco Symphony and the Boston Pops.

Currently he is an adjunct professor in Southern Utah University’s College of Performing and Visual Arts.

Sham is the playwright of the musicals Toyland and It’s a Dog’s Life: Man’s Best Musical; the screenplays After the Wizard and Hag and the Playhouse; and the plays Moby Dick and A Christmas Carol: On the Air, a “1940s radio show” version of the Charles Dickens classic written with Brad Carroll and produced at the Utah Shakespeare Festival the past three Christmas seasons. He also recently finished a collaboration with William Peter Blatty, adapting the award-winning screenplay The Ninth Configuration, for the stage under the title of the original novel, Twinkle, Twinkle, “Killer” Kane. He is currently teaching in Southern Utah University’s college of Performing and Visual Arts. He has also been an actor the Utah Shakespeare Festival for the past ten years.
Infinite Possibilities within Each of Us

By Heidi Madsen
From Insights, 2007

Who can define music’s power to persuade us into a mood; to generate any type of ambiance; or to transform a heart, a mind—or a script? To lyricist Peter Sham and composer Brad Carroll the original play Lend Me a Tenor, a consummate farce set in the 1930s against an operatic backdrop, simply “cried out to be musicalized.” Responding to this irresistible overture and giving this play the gift of song and dance, Sham and Carroll have managed to summon hidden sentiment from a fast-paced plot of swinging doors and mistaken identities, transforming Ken Ludwig’s farce into an emotionally resonant musical reminiscent of the golden age.

Perhaps going even a step beyond Cole Porter’s play-within-a-musical Kiss Me Kate, Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical is essentially an opera-within-a musical comedy. The curtain rises on a stage set for the opening of Verdi’s Grand Opera Otello. Thunder sounds from the illusory sky above an imposing sculpted lion, logo of the Venetian Republic, as the ensemble begins to sing Dio, Fulgor Della Buffera. Suddenly, the director yells “Stop!” We find ourselves inside the Cleveland Grand Opera House in the middle of a rehearsal; it is 1934 on a Saturday afternoon, and the true characters of Sham and Carroll’s play are preparing for an upcoming performance. It is only a rehearsal, but these anxious opening moments of Otello mirror and set the tone for the master play, wherein another kind of storm is brewing. The dire situation is this, “Il Stupendo” (otherwise known as Tito Merelli), celebrated tenor and principal soloist, has yet to arrive and the gala premiere is only hours away.

Henry Saunders, executive director of the Cleveland Grand Opera House, is distraught to the point of eating wax fruit and insulting President Roosevelt, who calls to reserve two aisle seats. His earnest, almost self-effacing, assistant Max, who happens to be in love with Saunders’s daughter Maggie, tries to succor him as best he can. “Sir,” he sings, “you have to stop blowin’ a gasket or you’re gonna wind up in a casket.” However, Saunders, Max, and members of the Opera Guild all share the same dread: “If he doesn’t show there will be trouble. And they’ll find our bodies in the rubble!”

Merelli is a virtuoso in the world of grand opera. Not unlike his dramatic counterpart Otello, who won Desdemona by the sorcery of his voice, “Il Stupendo” has charmed the world with his arousing serenades. The city of Cleveland is bursting with the anticipation of hearing him sing. Socialites and bellhops alike are clamoring to catch a glimpse of him—there are even a few hopefuls who look to him as a sort of catalyst for their own dreams, including Saunders’s daughter, Maggie.

Maggie is one who hopes Merelli’s visit to Cleveland will somehow change her life. She has met him once before, backstage at La Scala. Still in costume (all three yards or so of it) and damp from the rigors of his performance, he kissed the inside of Maggie’s hand, rendering her unconscious. However, she does not swoon with ecstasy or hear wild bells and whistles when Max kisses her. In fact, their love affair seems only too placid in comparison with her brief, but memorable encounter with “Il Stupendo.” And now, at the prospect of seeing him again, all Maggie can think about is having a fling with the man behind the loincloth.

Unlike other characters in the play, Max has no thought of using Merelli for some personal benefit; and, yet, this does not imply that he is content with mediocrity. Max has secret ambitions and latent talents, discerned and expounded upon by Carroll and Sham. He dreams of filling a concert hall with the music of his own voice, and of inspiring the kind of passion in Maggie that she feels when she hears Tito sing. All that he lacks is a good opportunity and proper encouragement, which he receives, ironically enough, from Tito Merelli.

After Signore and Signora Merelli finally arrive at the Cleveland Hotel, Saunders happily escorts them up to their penthouse suite, only to discover that “Il Stupendo,” who stuffed himself...
sick on the train, is too ill to make the final rehearsal: No. I’m-a gonna sing right now, I’m-a gonna throw up on-a the soprano,” he informs an incredulous Max and Saunders. Tito needs to sleep it off for a few hours, and Max is told to stay with the ailing Tenor in his suite and do whatever he can to promote this. He mixes several sleeping pills into Merelli’s Chianti, unaware that Tito has already taken four in an effort to half appease, half provoke his fiery wife Maria. Before passing out, however, Merelli gives Max some useful hints on how to free his voice and let love inspire and guide him to his destiny. It proves to be very timely advice when Merelli does not wake up from his drugged sleep and Max must pose as “Il Stupendo” to sing the part of Otello—and become, in the inspired words of Tito, “The Lion!”

In spite of several twists and subplots, Brad Carroll identifies the dual-core of this play as the relationship between Max and Maggie, and “the bond (both musical and personal) between Max and Tito.” Within these two sagas there are similar motifs, such as learning to hear the music of one’s own heart and finding the courage to follow one’s own bliss. Through these important associations, it becomes clear that Lend Me a Tenor: The Musical is not a play of implausibilities, but a play about the infinite possibilities within each of us—for, the more outrageous and impractical the dream, the worthier the pursuit.