

Impossible dream: young director brings musicals to Shakespeare Co.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story gave an incorrect last name for the author of "I Am My Own Wife." The author is Doug Wright.*

By Nelson Pressley

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When the Shakespeare Theatre Company expanded into the 775-seat Sidney Harman Hall in 2007, there was no way Artistic Director Michael Kahn could have known that a 22-year-old intern on a nine-month contract would eventually help musicals sashay into the classical company's mission.

But that's what is happening as the ebullient Alan Paul, now 30, becomes the face of the STC's emerging brand of in-house musicals. Last year, Paul got his feet wet with "[A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum](#)," and it was a hit. Next year, he'll have a go at Cole Porter's "Kiss Me, Kate." Right now, he's piloting "Man of La Mancha," and he's so excited that he brings a model of designer Allen Moyer's dark, ironbound prison set and Ann Hould-Ward's costume sketches to an interview.

Moyer was appealing because he has designed for opera, and Paul wanted that kind of forceful imagery and epic scale for his "La Mancha." But working with Hould-Ward floors him: Her Broadway career includes costumes for the original "Sunday in the Park With George," "Into the Woods" and "Beauty and the Beast." For Paul, that's pure magic, because even though he's now an insider with backstage access on Broadway, he always whispers with awe: We're backstage at a Broadway theater!

"I still feel that," he says, sitting in a small conference room in the STC's headquarters on Barracks Row. As a high-schooler in Potomac, he could recite from memory the addresses and seating capacity of all three dozen or so theaters on Broadway. "I was obsessed," he confesses.

For a theater geek, he looks pretty hip, especially in a sleek black long-tailed hooded shirt. But he smiles a lot and laughs easily, even bashfully putting his head on the table in mock exasperation when the subject switches from “La Mancha” — the long-running 1965 Broadway hit about [Miguel Cervantes and “Don Quixote,”](#) known for the breakout song “The Impossible Dream” — to the rapid rise of a local kid in one of Washington’s most esteemed companies.

“Michael put his faith in me, unproven,” Paul says.

“There’s a certain point where you trust somebody, and you give them a chance,” says Kahn, who has moved previous directors up through the ranks (including David Muse, now artistic director at Studio Theatre). After the popular success of Mary Zimmerman’s [“Candide”](#) in 2010-11, the STC decided to produce its own musical last season with “Forum,” and Kahn tapped Paul. “If there’s any show that would be right for Alan it would be that,” he says of Stephen Sondheim’s musical comedy with Roman roots. “He’d earned everybody’s respect.”

That regard came as Paul took charge of extracurricular events and restaged company productions of Shakespeare for the annual Free for All, but the route to the STC’s inner circle was both roundabout and really fast. Paul was 9 when he decided he wanted to be a Broadway star and started taking voice lessons, which led to piano lessons, too. By high school, he was accompanying and coaching friends through audition songs; as an actor at Northwestern University, he kept up his accompanist habit. He didn’t direct a show, though, until his senior year.

He got a meeting with Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith when Paul’s parents — nervy subscribers — told her their son was a budding director. Smith interviewed Paul and had him assistant-direct her “Cabaret.” An internship at Woolly Mammoth led to connections at the STC, thanks to Rebecca Taichman, who was directing in both places.

Soon he was getting real directing gigs: In 2012 he did Doug Wright’s solo drama [“I Am My Own Wife”](#) at Signature Theatre, then co-directed [“The Rocky Horror Show”](#) for Studio Theatre’s 2ndstage.

His 2011 STC concert staging of the musical [“The Boys From Syracuse”](#) was a chance to show what he could do in Harman Hall, and this winter he directed [“Penny”](#) for Washington National Opera’s American Opera Initiative at the Kennedy Center’s Terrace Theater. He’s

keen on opera now. He hasn't yet directed a classic on his own, though he thinks he's ready. "After 'Kiss Me Kate,' it's time," Kahn says.

Paul explains his multiple interests by pointing to his model, Jack O'Brien, whose Broadway hits range from the musicals "[Hairspray](#)" and "[The Full Monty](#)" to Tom Stoppard's three-part "[The Coast of Utopia](#)" and a "[Henry IV](#)" with Kevin Kline and projects for the Metropolitan Opera. That kind of scope is why he also admires his mentor, Kahn.

"Their appetite for work is not to do one thing," Paul says. "It's to do all of it."

If he puts himself in exceptional circumstances to learn, he also does his homework. Paul tells two good stories, the first about struggling to understand Shakespeare at Northwestern while everyone around him cruised through the verse. "Ego kicked in," he says, and he started over and pushed hard, refusing to quit on any scene until he really got it. Within a year, he'd read the whole canon.

Then there's his Jerry Zaks story, which boils down to this: Once Paul knew he was going to direct "Forum," he e-mailed the man who directed the 1996 Broadway revival with Nathan Lane and who directed Lane in "Guys and Dolls" and LuPone in "Anything Goes."

"He walked me through how to do a musical comedy," Paul says, getting advice that included making sure any big clever ideas will actually work in sync with the tunes.

Paul's musical training left him with some bedrock attitudes about technique: He loves the George Hearn and Patti LuPones of the world, performers on a firm footing dramatically and vocally. "You have to deliver the music," he says. "It has to be strongly acted, but I will not sacrifice the singing. That's what makes it so powerful."

The directorial skill set is pretty similar for handling musicals and Shakespeare, he suggests: Both are bigger and more physically complex than most modern plays. And for purists who think that musicals are fundamentally out of step with what a classical company ought to be doing?

"Come and see," Paul says at his coolest. "I think there is something unbelievably powerful about great lyrics put to music that does something different — not better or worse, but different — than a play."

Man of La Mancha Book by Dale Wasserman, lyrics by Joe Darion, composed by Mitch Leigh. Directed by Alan Paul. Through April 26 at Sidney Harman Hall, 610 F St. NW. Tickets \$20-\$115, subject to change. Call 202-547-1122 or visit www.shakespearetheatre.org.

 **0 Comments**

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