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Love Sick The Musical - A Reflection of My Undergraduate Studies

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Love Sick The Musical - A Reflection of My Undergraduate Studies

For millennia the Hebrew Bible has captivated scholars with stories that remain ripe for interpretation to this day. Arguably one of the most questionable and perplexing stories in this collection is “The Song of Songs.” It’s poetic verses depict a delicate affair through the classic biblical imagery of wild cedar and pomegranates that allude to a less than subtle sexual tone. In a brilliant interpretation of this ancient text, Ofra Daniel of the Jewish Circle Theater has written and has performed “The Song of Songs” as a riveting modern musical. I have had the honor of working with Ofra and a cast of nine other artists who prepared and performed this production since December of 2016. This musical is an excellent reflection of my undergraduate studies. For me, this production has woven the cross disciplinary facets of my Dominican education into a surprisingly complex and inspirational experience. I have been called upon to use not only my musical talent but also my scholarship to understand and value of text interpretation in a historic and a multicultural sense that has never been more important than it is today.

Love Sick The Musical

The story begins in modern Tel Aviv. The focus is on a troupe of transient buskers and street people as they begin to sing the song of Tirzah, The Meshuga, their crazy poet of love. As the stage erupts in music, Tirzah is center stage where she begins her monolog detailing her exile from Jerusalem and the journey she makes to Tel Aviv, barefooted and with no clothes. As Tirzah introduces herself she starts the story of why she had to leave Jerusalem.

As a young woman, in Jerusalem Tirzah was married off to the neighbor who lived across the street from her home. Her husband was a respected man who owned a house, had two twin boys from his previous wife who had died the year prior and was twenty year Tirah's senior. This man owned a fish market where he had three men working for him, selling fish oils, fish medicines, and fish for dining. Tirzah did not want to marry the fish seller and ran off only to begrudgingly be brought back by the women of Jerusalem to inevitably marry the fish man. From then on Tirzah lived a simple life. Her husband's twin boys kept her very busy as she took care of the house decorated with giant sea bream to bring the house good luck and fertility. Tirzah longs for a child, however her womb refuses to bear children. She grabs her husband and says to him "Give me a child or I shall die." As he kisses her on the cheek and whispers into her ear "I am not God." Time lost its meaning, as everyday looked exactly like the day before.

On Tirzah's 30th birthday she finds a mysterious love letter on her doorstep. As she reads the scent of jasmine fills the air. The love letter begins with quotes from the Song of Songs. Tirzah and her unknown lover exchange letters using imagery of doves and gazelles to describe their passion. The letter abruptly stop for a year till Tirzah's 31st birthday when she receives a letter from her anonymous lover telling her it is time for them to meet. After searching the city and fields for her lover Tirzah begins to go crazy because she cannot find him. Late at night she goes back to her house and is surprised to find her husband still awake and at his desk surrounded by the scent of jasmine and she immediately sees the white paper and blue ink of the love letters that she has been receiving. Upon discovering that her husband is her anonymous lover she goes crazy and runs away naked and barefoot to Tel Aviv.

Throughout the telling of this story the musicians lead the scenes and are on-stage. The

music is much more than a backdrop. The musicians were in the forefront, on stage, propelling the story line with a variety of music influenced by many cultures. I was proud perform with this multi-ethnic group of musicians and performers.

Education As A Musician

My Dominican education was a perfect preparation for the artistic environment of Love Sick. My bass education and jazz band experiences with Mark Culbertson prepared me as a professional musician. The weekly music performance seminars taught me how to present myself as a professional and what is expected of me as a performer. In 2009 I was a high school sophomore and was privileged to take Dr. Craig Singleton's World Music course. Never would I have expected that this course would be so valuable to my future.

In World Music we explored how music is interpreted by different cultures throughout the world. I was exposed to a variety of forms of music, musical schools of thought, and musical theories. Because I had this course in the beginning of my professional preparation my ear was open to different modes of music. I was ready to be a part of the Love Sick cast. The Love Sick score had a heavy Arabic influence with rhythms that were reflective in Latin and Afro-Cuban music. I had the ability to easily pick up the technical and emotional skills needed to perform the Love Sick music in a honest and culturally appropriate manner. A musician more talented and experienced than myself may not have been able to play this role as well, unless they had the cultural background and education needed to have a sincere appreciation of the culturally varied score.

The music department Performance Seminars honed my skills as a professional. I had the shortest bio in the program – by far – with zero professional experience. But with the skills I

learned in the Performance Seminars, I was easily able to blend in with the most seasoned performers. No one ever guessed that I was a real rookie. I knew how to look and act on stage as a professional performer. What I heard in that class was true. I was able to apply my knowledge of how to act on stage, bow, hold my body, not have my hands in my pocket, and so many other important lessons that may seem like only technicalities, but together form the standard to which professional musicians are held.

My opportunities to perform on campus allowed me to practice my professional skills. I am the most senior member Dominican Jazz Band. I began to play with the band in 2009. The Dominican Jazz Band met my encore credit for high school, as a creative arts. There was never a question that I would leave the band and I intend to continue as an alumni guest performer for as long as Mark Culbertson will allow. My relationship with Mark Culbertson has evolved greatly through the years.

Mark Culbertson has been one of the most influential people in my Dominican education. Mr. Culbertson has been my bass instructor for years and he prepared me for a professional career as a musician. Mark Culbertson is a true mentor and friend. It was because Mr. Culbertson that I was offered the opportunity to perform in Love Sick. The position was offered to Mr. Culbertson but he was unavailable and asked me if I would be willing to fill his role. For me this was the affirmation of his confidence in me that I was ready to do a job offered to him. With that offer Mark Culbertson showed me that I had met his expectations as a professional musician.

Mr. Culbertson's expectations of me were very high but I did not know that I had met them until I became friends with the leading man of Love Sick. My friend, Ali Amor (aka Ali Paris), is an internationally acclaimed vocalist and qanun player who studied at the most

prestigious music school in the Middle East before continuing his education at the Berklee School of Music in Boston. He has performed most recently with Alicia Keys. Ali and I both began our musical educations at the age of three and today I am able to hold my own next to Ali as a performer. My education at Dominican is on a par with the education Ali received in the middle east and at Berklee. But, in reality I feel my education is superior. Although Ali is an exceptional and talented musician he did not have the educational opportunities in the humanities that I received at Dominican.

Education In The Humanities

My courses in the area of humanities and cultural studies did much to prepared me to participate and contribute to the creation of production of Love Sick. My training in text interpretation in both Dr. Shribman and Dr. Chow's courses gave me the ability to critically analyze and interoperate the text of the play. Half of Love Sick was in Hebrew. My six years of Hebrew and Latin studies with Dr. Shribman prepared me to be a active member in the production on various levels. In generally my education in the humanities prepared me to understand and to have an awareness of the multi-cultural facet of the Love Sick production and the cast who brought the text the text interpretation to life.

I was able to participate in the development of the characters and storylines and even staging and props because of I had learned to interpret text. I was able to be a part of the co-creative process because I was able to use the experience and skills I learned in my classes. Occasionally the author of the play would invite comments from the cast on nuances of the production to ensure cultural relevancy. There was a question as to how the female lead should stop the drummers from playing. Decisions had to be made as to what would be the best

presentation through language and culture of the character to enrich the scene. The cast discussed many factors such as language (English, Arabic, or Hebrew), diction, intensity and exactly who she should be yelling at. By the end of the discussion we agree that she would be yelling profanities in Arabic at the percussionist. But the native Arabic speakers voiced caution at the diction and the meaning of the words she was saying. Ali said now that Arabic profanities were added to the play he questioned whether she should invite his Arabic friends to the production for fear of insulting them. Because of my language background I was able to have a perspective on which language should be used. I voice my opinion that the appropriate language for the scene was Arabic. We needed to take in consideration how heightened emotions sound in different languages. The author agreed and the scene was done in Arabic with a great personal response from the Arabic speakers in the audience.

I do not speak Arabic, but the Hebrew and Latin I learned from Dr. Shribman gave me enough of an introduction to participate many discussion that were going in a variety of languages. Half the play was in Hebrew and if you do not know Hebrew you miss out on a large part of the story line. I was not only able to follow but to participate and feel involved in the culture. Dr. Shribman did not only teach me the language of Hebrew he taught me how to hold myself and how to properly speak in group of Jews and Arabs. For example in Arabic one does not simply say the words. There is a whole character and layer of body language that is embodied in communication because Arabic is very much physical language. When there is a disagreement and one says, "No", it must be done with gusto otherwise no one take the speaker seriously.

Because of my education at Dominican I was able to relate to not only the culture of the

production but to the culture of the cast. This was the only time I have been in the US and not in the cultural nor ethnic majority. Through the production I experienced a little what it is like to be a minority. Now I have a somewhat better understanding of the experience international students have at Dominican. At Dominican I had a number of Saudi Arabian friends who mainly kept to themselves and were having some difficulty in assimilating into the US culture. My education made my assimilation into a cross-cultural environment easy. So much so that I am now receiving invitations to Sabbath, Shabbat, and Passover Seders. The cast was very surprised to learn that I was not Jewish because of my ability to conform to the Jewish culture which I learned from Rabbi Shribman. Other cast members did not have the background to be able to understand the cultural imagery of the play. An example was the scene where the naiduna was mentioned and if you did not know what a naiduna was, much of the meaning of the scene was lost. Although the majority of cast members were Jewish there were many ethnicities represented.

It was very insightful working with a cast of Israeli Jews, and Palestinians. One Syrian immigrant (Fisal), who was a drummer, was quite moved to see Israeli Jews and Palestinians come together and work peacefully to create art and music in a progressive environment. The eleven cast members and a dozen crewmembers included Moroccans, Japanese, Irish, Scottish, Italian, English, Lebanese, Hispanic, and Polish. Backstage and in the green room I would often hear a collection of three to four different languages that demonstrated the eclectic and culturally diverse collection of artists involved in the production of Love Sick. I felt at home and on par in talent and intellect with other members of the cast. I was able to participate in discussions. Topics ranged from international conflicts, national politics, to local and environmental

concerns.

As the only Irish-American and one of the few native English speakers I was a minority. Through the diverse student body at Dominican I had been exposed to groups of students from different cultures. I had worked with the international students in the production of Soul Candy. As a sophomore I worked at Caleruegua at the service counter. I served a variety of English as a second language students which required working through multiple language barriers. At Caleruegua I also worked with the mainly immigrant staff and had to navigate multiple languages. The friends I made at Dominican were an eclectic group of intelligent individuals who came from the Ivory coast, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, China, and the US with it's diverse cultures. Therefore, being in a group of international artists performers came naturally to me. Dominican prepared me well for this multi-cultural experience.

An unexpected lesson I learned through this international production was the interconnection of politics and art. I was working with artists, here on visas, during the first few weeks of the Trump presidency. There were many concerns about the future of the production based on the ability of some of the performers to safely travel in and out of the US. Ali and Faisal, being from Arab nations, voiced concerns about their ability to participate in future Love Sick productions due to the travel bans placed by the new US president. Such concerns are not new to these men growing up in the Arab world. Both seemed to take the travel restrictions in stride because to them this was nothing new. Ali and Faisal are banned from working in many areas of the world because they carry Palestinian and Syrian passports (respectively). This experience opened my eye to the fact that politics have impacted me personally through my colleagues. The ability for Love Sick to be the true international production that it was designed

to be is thwarted by not only the current US administration but by the global politics of today.

Despite the challenges there is still great future for Love Sick and for me. Love Sick is being considered for the prestigious Vassar Summer Musical Development program in Arlington, New York. The Broadway hit, Hamilton, was the last well know musical to be developed at Vassar. Depending upon the results of the New York presentation Love Sick may be commercially produced in San Francisco and/or Los Angeles in late 2017 or early 2018. The tour would be primarily to raise money for larger productions on Broadway and in London.

When Mark Culbertson recommended me for this opportunity all I wanted was a job. Being a part of Love Sick has been so much more. It has been like a mini graduate education where I have be able to take my undergraduate experiences at Dominican and apply then in an environment where I was able to further learn and grow as an artist, a scholar and a world citizen. The other musician reminisced about the pressures of auditioning for this production. Due to Mark's reputation, I simply walked into the rehearsal space with the expectation that I would satisfy the requirement of the job. I did. Mark bestowed his confidence on me as a musician and a performer. My academic experience at Dominican allowed me to fit into this intellectual environment and gave me the ability to synthesize as well as appreciate the diverse atmosphere of this international group of accomplished artists. Without my education at Dominican this experience would not have been possible. Being a part of the Love Sick cast make me truly value my growth at Dominican as an artist, an academic, and a person. I was able to draw from each of the Dominican four pillars – Study, Community, Reflection, and Service to successfully embark on my professional career. Thank you Dominican University!

<http://lovesickmusical.com/>



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