



## Enter Cutting

New musicals and plays take the stage for the first time at TheatreWorks festival — not without a lot of red-penning.

*By Rebecca Wallace*

As he pens the songs and lines for a new theater musical, Paul Gordon often thinks of a quote attributed to legendary dancer and choreographer Bob Fosse.

“Sometimes you have to murder your darling,” Gordon says, with not a little dry humor in his voice. The quote means that although you may be enraptured with your skippy patter song or dreamy ballad, the song may have nothing to do with the plot. And, snip, it’s cut from the show.

“I’ve gotten very, very used to it,” Gordon said of making cuts. “It’s really about the storytelling.”

The quote is particularly apropos these days, as Gordon prepares to bring his latest creation, a musical based on Jane Austen’s “Emma,” to the stage for the first time as part of TheatreWorks’ annual Spring Festival of New Works.

After writing the music, lyrics and book for “Emma,” he’s now enmeshed in rehearsal. Actors are singing songs and speaking lines that once existed only on paper. Many a change is being made, with help from the performers and director Robert Kelley (also TheatreWorks’ founding artistic director). Once the show is on its feet, a joke may tank or a tune may drone.

As Gordon said before rehearsals started, “I think we will have to murder some darlings

along the way, but I have no idea what they are.”

On April 26, “Emma” has its maiden voyage, sailing onto the Second Stage at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts to kick off the festival. It’s one of four new musicals and three plays getting staged readings, which are less formal than actual productions. There are no costumes, and the actors’ movement on stage is just sketched out, but a staged reading can help gauge the quality of a new production.

Each production will have repeat stagings during the festival, which runs through May 7. The other musicals are “Big Red Sun,” with music by Georgia Stitt and book and lyrics by John Jiler; “Asphalt Sun,” with music and lyrics by Andrew Lippa; and “Something’s Wrong,” with music and lyrics by Lance Horne and book and lyrics by Winter Miller.

The plays are: “Mezzulah, 1946” by Michele Lowe, “American Klepto” by Allison Moore, and “The Drunken City” by Adam Bock.

Audiences get to play a role: they can give feedback on cards that will help the artists make more modifications. There’s also the thrill of getting a sneak peek at what could become a modern classic. You never know. “Pieces that you’re sure going to do well sometimes don’t,” said New Works director Kent Nicholson, who was hired by TheatreWorks about five-and-a-half years ago

to create the program. "Sometimes big risks do extremely well. Or you find where the potential is and take it from there. ... It's not necessarily about finding that perfect piece."

Nicholson always keeps an eye out for potential: he accepts play and musical submissions year-round. His main goal is to give artists the precious time and space to work on their creations, whether in the rehearsal process or in a separate writers' retreat program for new works.

If more help is needed, Nicholson and other TheatreWorks folks also give feedback on a work, whether it's clearing up a plot point or fleshing out a character.

Feedback from both TheatreWorks and the audiences can be invaluable, said composer Georgia Stitt from "Big Red Sun."

"We feel we'll come away from the festival with a completed first draft," she said. "We'll come away ... having learned a few things about the piece: Does the audience enjoy it? Are they confused? Are any characters underdeveloped? Are there any anachronisms?"

"Big Red Sun" follows a family broken by World War II. Dad is a swing musician and bandleader who comes home from battle to find music has evolved without him, and his son tries to connect with his father while becoming a guitarist of folk and protest songs. Writer and lyricist John Jiler, who grew up in the 1950s, charmed Stitt by showing her an early incarnation of the play.

"Our goal is to have the music of the '60s and the '40s really interact," Stitt said. "Both of these men are musicians, but their experiences are so different. ... When (the father) comes home, the music has changed and he can't find his place any more; suddenly it's fox trots and society music."

Stitt enjoyed exploring so many different styles of music, but said it's been an interesting challenge to make sure people see her own

stamp on the score, and not just see it as tribute music.

Artists often bring intriguing resumes to the festival. For example, Stitt just wrote music for the Disney/ABC TV musical "Once Upon A Mattress," while composer Andrew Lipka had his musical "A Little Princess" premiere at TheatreWorks last summer.

Some, like Stitt, are just hoping the festival yields a satisfactory first draft. Others want a production of their work.

Sometimes a festival show is lucky enough to later get a TheatreWorks premiere, as was the case with "Striking Twelve," a musical by the pop group Groovelily. A holiday tale with inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen, it opened at TheatreWorks in 2004.

Nicholson said he could tell right away when "Striking Twelve" took the stage during New Works that it would be successful.

"You could just tell the way people were reacting to it. They we're loving it," he said. "And it transcended age; older members of the audience liked it as much as the younger. That's a rare thing, especially when the band is essentially a rock band."

BOX: Before he wrote the musical "Emma," Paul Gordon created a hit Broadway show based on another classic, "Jane Eyre." To read more about his creative process, go to arts editor Rebecca Wallace's blog at [www.PaloAltoOnline.com](http://www.PaloAltoOnline.com) (click on Ad Libs).

What: TheatreWorks' 2006 Spring Festival of New Works, giving staged readings of four new musicals and three new plays  
Where: Second Stage, Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro Street.

When: April 26 through May 7. Each production will have more than one reading (see schedule at [theatreworks.org](http://theatreworks.org)).

Cost: \$15 general per show, \$10 for subscribers and members.

Info: Call (650) 903-6000 or go to [theatreworks.org](http://theatreworks.org)