

A dynamic duet

Words-and-music team met as teens in 'Little Shop' cast

BY SUSAN JOHNSTON



Brian Lowdermilk and Kait Kerrigan.

KAIT KERRIGAN was riding the New York subway on her way to see a movie with her boyfriend when a high school student from Florida recognized the young writer from her MySpace photo and rushed over to gush about her work. “I was completely thrown off, but flattered,” Kerrigan recalls.

She and her collaborator, composer Brian Lowdermilk, have yet to mount a full-scale production on or Off Broadway, but thanks to online exposure—they created joint profiles on MySpace and Facebook to promote their work, as well as two free-standing websites—and several prestigious musical theatre awards, they are already attracting a loyal following of musical theatre professionals and fans.

The pair’s most recognizable song, “Run Away with Me,” is becoming a

staple at cabaret performances, auditions, and theatre festivals across the country. In fact, a young actor who sang the piece at the Florida State Thespian Festival last year posted the video clip on YouTube and received thousands of views and dozens of comments from users around the world who were discovering Kerrigan and Lowdermilk’s work for the first time.

Building a fan base

Some who already know Kerrigan and Lowdermilk predict that lots of others will know their work soon. “They have a huge and brilliant future,” says Alison Fraser, who appeared in *The Woman Upstairs*, their first New York production. Fraser, a two-time Tony Award nominee, was invited to join the production partially

because of her work as Martha on the original recording of *The Secret Garden*.

“I was absolutely star-struck with her,” Kerrigan admits. “She happened to really like [*The Woman Upstairs*] and agreed to do it.”

Fraser’s involvement has helped Kerrigan and Lowdermilk gain credibility in the New York theatre community and beyond. Her website includes a “cheerleading” section to help emerging writers gain exposure, and she shares Kerrigan’s work with directors and producers whenever she can. “I’ve always loved working with new composing teams, and I think it’s really important to support the people you believe in,” Fraser explains.

Kerrigan and Lowdermilk agree that Fraser’s support has helped open doors for them. “Once you get one really good person [in your cast] who has a name and people want to work with, your cachet increases,” Kerrigan says. “[Alison Fraser] is a really great friend to have and a huge help to our careers.”

Setting the stage

Growing up outside of Philadelphia, Kerrigan, twenty-seven, and Lowdermilk, twenty-five, were both involved in community and high school theatre. The two starred in a summer production of *Little Shop of Horrors* through the Young People’s Theatre Workshop at The Player’s Club of Swarthmore. Though Kerrigan played Audrey and Lowdermilk played Seymour, it seemed like an odd pairing at the time.

“With the then *enormous* age difference, we did not get along well,” Kerrigan recalls. (She was sixteen to Lowdermilk’s fourteen.)

The following summer they starred in *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown* and, though still a bit out of synch, they were able to coerce the rest of the cast into perfecting the timing of the “Book Report” canon.

“I guess that was our first real collaboration,” Lowdermilk says.

Having those shared experiences and reference points from community theatre would later aid their partnership when they reconnected a few

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years into the future. Lowdermilk first attended Harvard, then transferred to New York University, where he decided to focus on music. Kerrigan was already in New York City studying English at Barnard College. Their parents suggested the two get together, since Kerrigan had started writing plays and Lowdermilk was composing musicals.

Lowdermilk jokes that he thought he might get a date out of it, but instead he got a collaborator who shared his vision for musical theatre.

"We have a similar aesthetic," says Kerrigan. "We can reference productions that we both saw when we were in middle school, which is a really cool thing to do. The longer you have a shared experience, the easier it is to have a shorthand, which makes your collaboration better."

Kerrigan and Lowdermilk were invited back to YPTW for a benefit performance where they reconnected with Josh Young, who also appeared in *Little*

Shop and had gone on to play Marius in a national tour of *Les Misérables*.

"I remember Brian would always be working on the synthesizer or piano," says Young, who also sang in high school choir with Lowdermilk. "But I had no idea he had this incredible talent. I'd rather sing their music than anyone else's."

In fact, when Young released an album in 2005, he chose Lowdermilk to produce and orchestrate it and included Lowdermilk and Kerrigan's song, "Run Away with Me," as well as Lowdermilk's "How Not to Be with You." Lowdermilk's sweeping music and Kerrigan's smart, slightly edgy lyrics seemed tailor-made for Young's voice.

Honest work

Young also appeared in the writing partnership's first New York production, a self-produced performance of *The Woman Upstairs* at the New York Musical Theatre Festival that was funded by

family, friends, and out of Kerrigan and Lowdermilk's own wallets. Lowdermilk describes it as "very low scale." But it did attract the attention of a producer from TheatreWorks, who afterward commissioned the pair to write a musical based on the children's book *Henry and Mudge* about a friendship between a little boy and his dog.

That's not exactly Victor Hugo, but as Lowdermilk says, "We do not turn down honest work."

Kerrigan advises other writers that "if something presents itself, you should be honest with yourself about it. If you can find something that matters to you, then do it. *Henry and Mudge* is not quite a plot or a story. What I responded to was creating something out of the environment that you're in. It's about communication."

The commission Kerrigan and Lowdermilk got for *Henry and Mudge* also gave them a stable, predictable environment to work in. Kerrigan says it was "a really great project for us because it's very rare in theatre that you know where something is going to go. With TheatreWorks, you know that the show is going to go through a very specific two-year process, which is very short for musicals. Generally five years is considered a short process." (To put this into perspective, consider that Duncan Sheik's rock musical *Spring Awakening* had its first workshop in 2000 and opened on Broadway in 2006, which doesn't include the years of writing before the workshop.)

While their productions reflect a mutual appreciation for contemporary music and image-driven scenes, Lowdermilk and Kerrigan's personalities are a study in contrasts. "They're very symbiotic, a little like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire," Fraser explains. "Brian wears his heart on his sleeve, but it takes a little more time to know Kait. They're a combination of wild inspiration and artistry."

Lowdermilk and Kerrigan also demonstrate the different educational paths people can take to become successful in theatre. "The thing that makes our collaboration work is that

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we have different educational backgrounds," says Lowdermilk. "We have very different skill sets, but we complement each other."

"There's a lot of different ways you can go out and do theatre, and having a degree is one way to open up doors," adds Kerrigan. She earned a liberal arts degree from Barnard College, and, although she had always loved theatre and music, it wasn't until her senior year that she considered pursuing theatre as a career path. After graduation, she continued to write plays as she worked as a music publicist and an education consultant until she eventually "weaned [herself] off of having a full-time job."

Lowdermilk, on the other hand, transferred to New York University so he could focus on studying music. "In addition to going somewhere that had a dedicated program, I spent three years of my college experience doing unpaid work for a lot of people," he explains. Hoping to soak up all aspects of writing musicals, Brian assisted other composers, including an unpaid apprenticeship with Jason Robert Brown on *Urban Cowboy*.

According to Lowdermilk, "If you're going to be in New York City, you gotta take advantage of that. Being a fly on the wall in a rehearsal can be hugely helpful."

The future

These days Lowdermilk and Kerrigan are working on their own projects and teaching master classes. The American Society of Composers, Author and Publishers (ASCAP) chose their musical, *The Unauthorized Autobiography of Samantha Brown*, for a workshop led by several Broadway writers and composers, including Stephen Schwartz.

Lowdermilk started writing *Samantha Brown* around 2000, during his freshman year of college. Though the musical focuses on the heroine's existential crisis following the death of her best friend, Lowdermilk admits that it is a thinly veiled attempt at telling his own story. Speakeasy Stage Company in Boston hosted a workshop performance of the

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piece last December, and Lowdermilk and Kerrigan are hoping to mount a full-scale production later this year.

They are also tackling two new projects. *Tales from the Bad Years* is a musical revue about "youth, determination, and unexpected love." Kerrigan says they started the project because "we had a bunch of ideas for songs and scenes that were shorter but that we wanted to find a home for. Second, we had a lot of college kids asking us for something they could perform at their colleges." They hope that *Tales from the Bad Years* will be "easy to cast and really fun to put up."

The other project is a "living musical" called *The Freshman Experiment* (or *Fresh X* for short). Lowdermilk and Kerrigan found two college freshmen to post blogs about their first year of school (they're at <http://thefreshmanexperiment.com>) so that they could adapt some of the material into songs that capture the college experience.

"We're writing a show about their lives as they're living them," Lowdermilk explains. The *Fresh X* blogs are scheduled to run through next summer, but the direction of the project is unclear after that because the concept is so new.

Their advice to young people wanting to pursue theatre professionally?

According to Kerrigan, "The most important thing is to always make sure you tell stories that matter to you, be aware of your audience, [and] don't be scared to try to do it. Being in high school and college, you have the opportunity to put shows up. That is invaluable when you're in places without all the financial constraints."

Lowdermilk adds, "For actors or anybody, just remember how collaborative it is [and] learn how to work with people. The single greatest thing over the last five years is that we like working together, and we like working with other people. I love being in the room with people who are more talented than [I am]. Musical theatre is a great place to be." And it's that much better for having Kerrigan and Lowdermilk there, too. ▼

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