

‘Waterfall’ a Vast Collaboration Across Cultures

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Bie Sukrit, center, and the Company of Waterfall. Photo taken at the Pasadena Playhouse.

• Photo by Jim Cox

The newest production at Seattle’s [5th Avenue Theatre](#) is a vast collaboration across countries, cultures, and generations: *Waterfall* is a new musical created by composer David Shire and librettist Richard Maltby, Jr., based upon the classic Thai novel *Behind the Painting*, which was adapted into a Thai musical by the same title under the direction of producer-director Tak Viravan.

Maltby told the *International Examiner* that *Waterfall* is years in the making. “The project came to me about five years ago, when I was approached to write lyrics for a proposed American adaptation of a musical called *Behind the Painting*,” he said. “I suggested that the story would be transformed if the female lead were changed from an aristocratic Thai woman to an aristocratic American—but this seemingly simple idea required re-conceiving the show from top to bottom.”

This huge change required an expansion in the creative team. “Soon I was writing

the script as well as the lyrics,” Maltby said. “The change also required taking a fresh look at the score, and I asked to have composer David Shire join the team.”

Maltby and Shire have a long history as successful partners in musical theatre. “David Shire and I met in our freshman year at Yale,” Maltby said. “In 1956!”

From the beginning, they shared common interests. He said: “We both came to Yale with the not-so-secret intention of writing a musical that would be produced by the Yale Dramatic Association. We were the only two people in our class (actually in the whole school) with that intention, and we really had no choice but to join forces.”

Maltby considers them both to be very fortunate. “We often marvel at our good luck, since we were basically thrown together, to have found partners who were actually talented,” he said. “We did indeed write two musicals at Yale—after which we came to New York and started working professionally. Our first break came when that young beginner Barbra Streisand recorded five of our songs in her earliest award-winning albums.”

Now, *Waterfall* is the latest in their series of successes. “Its producer-director, Tak Viravan, the brilliantly multi-talented creator of *Behind the Painting*—a classic love story—wanted to bring it to America,” Maltby said, “but wasn’t sure how to do it.”

That possibility got the attention of producer Jack Dalglish. “When I met Tak Viravan at the opening of *Spring Awakening* on the West End, we immediately hit it off!” Dalglish said. “As I got to know Viravan and his work and aspirations, we started talking about developing his original musicals for Broadway.”

Dalglish watched videos of more than a dozen of Viravan’s Thai musicals, and developed a short list of possibilities. “We narrowed it down to two—both tales of forbidden love, a common theme in my work,” he said. Ultimately, *Behind the Painting* was chosen for an American adaptation.

The project began slowly with a workshop production. “After we did the lab production of *Behind the Painting*, two of my colleagues separately suggested the Pasadena Playhouse,” Dalglish said. “They contacted Sheldon Epps, the artistic director there, on my behalf and we set up a meeting.”

The conversation was a success, Dalglish said: “I came from the meeting knowing that the Playhouse would be the perfect home for our developmental production. Sheldon and I have very similar visions when it comes to diversity in our work and there is a large Asian Pacific Islander (API) community in the Los Angeles area (including the largest Thai community in the United States).”

As a producer, Dalglish then sought to expand support for his production on the west coast. “With its high standards of artistic excellence and reputation as a premier incubator for new musicals, I always knew The 5th Avenue would be the perfect place for our Broadway tryout,” he said. “In fact, I started the conversation with David Armstrong and Bill Berry back in early 2013. The theatre’s Chinese-inspired design and Seattle’s large API community also made The 5th Avenue attractive to us.”

Librettist Maltby and composer Shire worked alongside Dalglish the entire time. “We did readings of early versions of the script, in which we just brought in some actor friends to read the script around a table,” Maltby said. “After that we did a few official Actor’s Equity-approved readings, each a bit more elaborate, ending in the fully staged ‘Lab’ reading in early 2014.”

Maltby and Shire found this slow process beneficial to the current version of *Waterfall*. “I have done many musicals but none have made such genuine use of the ‘reading’ process,” Maltby said. “With each reading and performance, the show grew. The characters became more complex, and the historical context became more and more a force in the plot.”

This historical context was deemed crucial by the creative team. “The impact of America on Asia in the pre-WWII period is a fascinating story, and one which most Americans know little about,” Maltby said. “Americans know about Pearl Harbor and everything after that, but little about the time before it.”

It is this earlier time period of 1932 to 1940 in which *Waterfall* is set. “In 1932, Siam ended its monarchy and became a democracy, and based, as all new democracies are, on the model of America, Siam was being drawn towards America,” Maltby said, contrasting Siam with nearby Japan. “In Japan in 1932, American culture—music, dances, movies, clothes—was sweeping the country, so much so that it was considered a threat to the greatness of the culture of Imperial Japan.”

This proved to be a harbinger of dangerous things to come. “Japan, in contrast to Siam, was turning away from America,” Maltby described. “By 1940, American music was banned in Japan, and anti-American sentiment grew in tandem with Japan’s desire to reclaim its greatness by expanding outside its geographical borders.”

Combining this history with the original Thai story of *Behind the Painting* was a great undertaking. “All musicals are challenges, but musicals with original stories are the hardest,” Maltby said. “With all of this additional factual material coming into play, the story of the musical began to achieve an unexpected and quite thrilling scale.”

Maltby also considers *Waterfall* a good opportunity for Americans to understand their role on the larger world stage. “Americans don’t really understand how profoundly America and its culture, not to mention the ever-gleaming universal presence of the ‘American Dream,’ has affected the great world,” Maltby added. “America may be reviled, distrusted, embraced, idealized—sometimes all at the same time—but its presence as a moral and defining concept never disappears. We often don’t understand the impact we have on the rest of the world.”

To communicate this impact, Maltby relied on the contributions of the entire creative team. “Musicals are living things. They change and grow. Sometimes they even grow up,” he said. “In some ways, I think *Waterfall* is now more mature.”

Producer Dalgleish believes that *Waterfall* offers not only a beautiful spectacle onstage, but that its story is relevant to multicultural audiences everywhere. “It’s an epic love story that tackles one of the most pressing questions facing the U.S. (and the world) today: How does one not lose one’s cultural identity in a modern world?”

He sought to produce a story that addresses contemporary cultural fears. “As we, as a people, become more homogeneous, we fear losing our cultural heritage and our identities, so we hold them tight,” he said. “It’s apparent today in the politics of the confederate flag, gay marriage, and immigration, by example.”

Writer Maltby agrees. “The show conjures up perhaps the greatest issue confronting America and the world today: How do you deal with cultural identity in a world that, as it becomes more modern, also becomes more homogenized?” he said. “Everywhere on the planet, people are dealing with variations on this issue. It is behind America’s immigration issues, Russia’s neo-imperialism, the extremists of Islam—the list is endless.”

Waterfall takes a different approach to these concerns. “In *Waterfall*, the issue is presented through the Asian, pre-World War II politics that are the backdrop to our love story,” he said. “Our protagonists, Noppon and Katherine, are running from themselves and think the answer lies in running to another culture, only to find, in the end, that they can embrace their heritage (or not) and live in a modern world.”

Dalgleish believes that the entire creative team has fulfilled this mission well. “It’s an inspired collaboration,” he said, “and one of the most fulfilling of my career.”

Waterfall runs from October 1 to 25, at the 5th Avenue Theatre, 1308 Fifth Avenue, Seattle. For more information, visit www.5thavenue.org/show/waterfall.