

## Come Hear the Music Play

By Amanda Jean Boyle and Michelle Boyle

A Long Island piano teacher warned Judy Kitt that she was verging on stage mother territory. Mrs. Kitt, an Armonk resident, had brought her five-year-old son in for lessons. But Mrs. Kitt was not an overzealous and blindly proud mother, she knew her son Thomas had real talent. At four Thomas had been stringing together notes and chords on his own; he needed special attention to grow. She insisted that Gloria, the teacher, at least listen, and when she did, Thomas' natural talent was undeniable.

And then last week, Tom Kitt won two Tony Awards. Best Original Score (Music and/or Lyrics) written for the Theatre – “Next to Normal” Music: Tom Kitt, Lyrics: Brian Yorkey and Best Orchestrations - Michael Starobin & Tom Kitt, “Next to Normal”. This second Tony was awarded as a tie with Martin Koch, “Billy Elliot”.

Gloria contributed to the beginning of Tom's musical journey, teaching him until he was seven, after which there was nothing new she could help him with. So Tom moved on, taking lessons with Joel Rosen, a celebrated pianist with the Benny Goodman Band.

Rosen at the time ran a music school at his personal music studio in Ardsley and Joy Rosen, the late Mr. Rosen's wife, fondly recalls the time the young boy spent there, “Tom was quite a boy, he was very focused. He and my husband became very close. They were in the living room on a Friday afternoon when the visiting nurse arrived. Lessons were usually one hour; the nurse encouraged the two to finish the piece they were working on since Tom was doing so well. That two hour Friday session was their last and because of those two hours, Joel left us on a high note on that Monday when he died in 1998. Tom absorbed so much from Joel over the four years they worked together.”

This year when Mrs. Rosen watched the Tony Awards, she recognized her husband's influence in Tom Kitt's musical arrangements for “Next to Normal”. She looks forward to seeing the show on Broadway.

Several years and piano teachers later, Thomas dropped piano for high school sports. He became an all county soccer player with Byram Hills High School, scoring the most goals of the season. His old brother is also an accomplished athlete, while his sister took the music route, and is an opera singer.

But he was not just some unthinking jock. While at Byram Hills High School, Tom Kitt quickly bonded with his first English Teacher, Mr. Montgomery and became one of his senior mentors. Kitt remembered, “It was natural for artists to bond with their English teachers.” Even though at the time Tom was not actively working on his music, this and similar relationships with teachers at Byram Hills would inform his future career.

He became refocused on the arts when he attended Interlochen, a summer arts camp in Michigan. The seriousness of his peers made him realize that he had developed some bad habits. Interlochen demanded hard work and concentration. Tom saw that to excel in arts, he would have to dedicate his life to it.

Interlochen exposed Tom to all kinds of music. It was there that he saw the musical “Cabaret” and for the first time had an unexpected emotional experience with entertainment.

Kitt’s advises students interested in the arts to “attend summer programs to meet other people that share your interests”, as his time at Interlochen was very important to Tom’s growth as an artist. He also emphasizes the importance of being focused, choosing a specialization of interest in the industry and to, “most importantly, develop strong work ethics.”

After Byram Hills, Tom attended Columbia University, where he met another fellow musician, Brian Yorkey (Yorkey also introduced Thomas to his future wife). Together, Yorkey and Kitt wrote two varsity theatrical shows while at Columbia.

Out of college Kitt was offered a job at Morgan Stanley. His preference was to play music with the The Tom Kitt Band. It was the sort of dream-following decision that could easily worry parents. Was their son going down the starving artist road?

Remembering that time period, Mrs. Kitt said, “We were fortunate that when our son didn’t want to take the job at Morgan Stanley we could assist him [financially]. He could go on with what he wanted to do, play in a band.” She advises, “As a parent, try not to impose your values on your children.”

After Columbia, Thomas auditioned and was accepted into the BMI Musical Theatre writing workshop. At BMI Yorkey and Kitt developed “Next to Normal”, which was inspired by a television show about electric shock therapy. Yorkey wrote the book and lyrics and Kitt wrote the music. The story is of a bipolar woman and her illness’ effects on her family’s dynamics. Kitt has stressed the importance of a compelling story.

At BMI Kitt met Amanda Green, daughter of Adolph Green, writer of the Broadway shows including “Bells Are Ringing” and “On The Town”.

Kitt became Ms. Green’s musical director. Together they put together “High Fidelity” in 2006, a musical adaptation of Nick Hornby’s 1995 novel (the novel has also been made into a movie, starring John Cusack). Kitt was the composer, while it was lyricist Green’s first Broadway musical. David Stone produced; he’d previously produced “Rent.”

Tom credited “High Fidelity” to Mr. Montgomery, fondly remembering when a group of students would stay after school and get together with Mont, Mr. Pollack and Mr. Shapiro—other BHHS English teachers—to talk about different literature. It turned the kids into avid readers.

The show disappointed reviewers and ran only ten days in the fall of 2006. Kitt admits making some mistakes in the process and expectations. But he advises, “Never get too down.”

Kitt learned from this experience that there are no guarantees in the theatre business. He states, “There appears to be no rhyme or reason why a show is successful, it could be timing or perception. A lot of people loved ‘High Fidelity’ and it has successfully shown in regional theatres.” Kitt lives and works by his own words of wisdom, and continued working hard, undeterred by the flop.

And now he is being awarded (literally!) for his perseverance.

Sure there have been struggles. “Next to Normal” was in the making for 11 years. Kitt said, “I was relentless in creating it and developed a lot of faith in the material.” Many people believed in the work, and that opened doors to producers and financing. The show still requires maintenance, support and attention.

First “Next to Normal” went to Second Stage, an off Broadway venue that introduced the hit “Spelling Bee” in 2004. There the show received good reviews. Stone, again producing for Kitt, was protective of the show and delayed a Broadway appearance. Instead, the show traveled to the Arena Stage in Washington, DC. There they tinkered, listening to critics’ reviews and audiences’ responses. The show was slightly rewritten and received rave reviews at the Arena. The critics went wild for the six person cast, including Alice Ripley and Brian d’Arcy James, who played the part of Dan, the patriarch of the family. d’Arcy James reluctantly left “Next to Normal” to perform the lead role in “Shrek”. His replacement was an original “Jersey Boy”, J. Robert Spencer.

The show received “Over the Moon Reviews.” They were ready for Broadway.

After some consideration of theatres, the show previewed March 27, 2009 at the Booth Theatre and opened April 15<sup>th</sup>.

Failure did not stop Kitt from working, and neither has success. Instead of resting on his laurels, Kitt is currently working on an adaptation of Green Day’s 2004 album “American Idiot”. It’s a musical based on the 21<sup>st</sup> century with orchestrations by Kitt.

He is also working on the musical treatment as orchestrator of the Broadway musical, “Everyday Rapture”. It is an autobiographical show written and performed by Sherie Rene Scott playing at the Second Stage.

Tom Kitt’s musical journey has hit on a new level, but it is still just the beginning of a promising career for this very talented young man.