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Creators' rights rescued

DC cartoonist helped change industry policy.

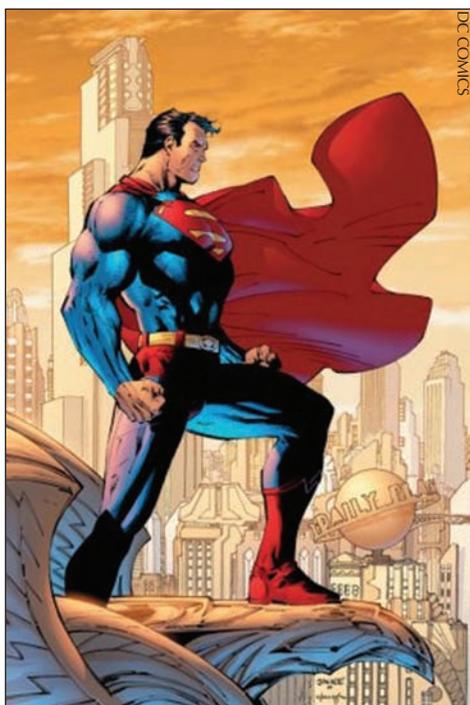
RAFAEL MEDOFF JNS.ORG

Millions of people flocked to movie theatres this month to see *Man of Steel*, in which Superman is once again called upon to save the world from some menace. But, back in 1975, Superman's Jewish creators found themselves broke, nearly homeless, and desperately in need of a hero of their own. It's a story with the pathos and drama of a comic book adventure – and it has a happy ending.

As teenagers growing up in Cleveland's mostly Jewish Glenville neighborhood in the 1930s, writer Jerry Siegel and his artist friend Joe Shuster created Superman, the mighty costumed hero who has been a fixture of American pop culture ever since. Siegel later wrote that he and Shuster were influenced by a combination of "being unemployed and worried during the Depression and knowing hopelessness and fear," and "hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany." The Superman character emerged from their "great urge to help the downtrodden masses, somehow."

Comics historians have compared Superman's origins to both the Jewish immigrant experience and the biblical story of young Moses. With the planet Krypton on the verge of destruction, desperate parents send their infant off in a rocket ship to earth, where he is raised by strangers – Jonathan and Martha Kent taking the roles of Pharaoh and his daughter. Whether disguised as the midwestern newspaper reporter Clark Kent, or as an Egyptian prince whose Jewish roots are hidden, our hero would prefer to quietly assimilate into his surroundings, but his outrage at injustice propels him into the role of rescuer.

Not realizing the fortune Superman would reap, Siegel and Shuster sold their first 13-page Superman comic strip, and the rights to the character to National Periodicals (later known as DC Comics) for \$130. Within a few years, the character had branched out into movies, cartoons, a weekly radio show and a daily



Writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster's Superman.

newspaper comic strip. Siegel and Shuster took no steps to reassert ownership of their creation. They were making a good living as the full-time creative team on the Superman comic book and decided not to rock the boat.

In 1941, Siegel pitched DC the idea of *Superboy*, a series based on their hero's adventures as an adolescent. DC turned down the proposal. But when Siegel and Shuster returned from service in the Second World War, they were stunned to find DC publishing a Superboy comic book, for which they received no credit or royalties. They sued DC and won a \$400,000 judgment.

It was a bittersweet victory. Most of the money was eaten up by their legal expenses, and comic book publishers grew wary of hiring them. By the early 1970s, Siegel was working as a \$7,000-a-year clerk and Shuster, who had been working as a messenger but gave it up because he was losing his eyesight, was boarding with relatives.

Enter Neal Adams. Bursting onto the comic book scene in 1967, Adams' powerful and ultra-realistic style of illustration – rooted in his background in the world of advertising art – quickly won him the ad-

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Finding voice on the stage

Daniel Maté performs for his old hometown on July 4.

BASYA LAYE

A little taste of Broadway is coming to Vancouver when lyricist and composer Daniel Maté brings *Songs I Wrote in New York* to the Cultch on July 4. Before he takes the stage for his first-ever hometown concert of theatre songs, Maté will be joining several local and international colleagues at the In Tune Conference, a weekend of masterclasses, panel discussions, new works in development and performance, curated by local theatre mavens Rachel Ditor and Katrina Dunn.

In 2005, the Vancouver-born and raised Maté moved east to complete a master's degree in musical theatre writing at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Eight short years later, he has been named the most promising musical theatre lyricist in the United States, winning the 23rd annual Kleban Prize, following closely on the heels of being selected for two other major awards, the Jonathan Larson Grant and the ASCAP Foundation's Cole Porter Award for music and lyrics, in 2010.

Originally, however, Maté hails from the stages of Habonim Dror's Camp Miriam, where he spent his school years attending summer camp on Gabriola Island and participating in youth movement activities – including the annual camp musical productions. Judging merely by the zeal with which Maté approaches his chosen field today, it is surprising that musical theatre was not an obvious career path.

"Music and theatre were both important aspects of the Camp Miriam experience," Maté told the *Independent*. "A big part of the educational approach there involved using song and role-playing/reenactment to teach about history, culture and politics. And, of course, every spring we put on an actual musical (called Neshef) in the city as a fundraiser. As a teenager, I ended up writing songs for and music directing several of those – some were original but most were spoofs of existing musicals, including my crowning achievement, *Little Shop of Hummus*."

"Despite that, musical theatre per se was never a big part of my world growing up," he added. "I was not a musical theatre kid. Music and theatre, yes, but for the longest time those were separate things that occasionally merged, but not in the sense of show-tunes and choreography or a deep knowledge of or reverence for the American musical theatre idiom. I did have a few musical cast albums I loved – *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and, later on, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* – but I didn't see a lot of musicals on stage. For whatever reason, a large group of people singing and dancing, that very bright sound that many musicals tend to have, some big-voiced diva belting an 11 o'clock number: I didn't feel a connection to these things. You'd be much more likely to find me at a Metallica concert at age 14, or listening to a Wu-Tang Clan or Ani DiFranco album at age 20, than watching *West Side Story* or *Guys and Dolls*, or even *Sweeney Todd*. When I got to NYU for grad school, I found I had a lot of remedial learning to do about the history of the form."

Maté's path to musical theatre took a circuitous – and fortuitous – route.

"I was into both music and theatre, separately. I



COURTESY OF DANIEL MATÉ

Daniel Maté

have perfect pitch and played piano from age five on (and guitar since age 17), so that was always a big part of my identity. I also loved to act, and did a lot of it in high school and university (McGill), although I never studied it full time. It took me until my late twenties to realize that these were not just hobbies or interests for me: they were core passions and talents. Either I was going to take the leap and make them the focus of my professional life, or else the failure to do so was going to make me miserable. That was basically the choice I faced. The question was, which one – music or theatre? Or might there be a way to blend the two? Around that time, I became aware that New York University had a graduate program in musical theatre writing and I was intrigued. At first, not being an aficionado of the American musical theatre, I doubted and very nearly dismissed the idea. Fortunately, I got some very good advice from family and friends, which was basically, 'you're crazy – this is perfect for you.' And I basically had to put my prejudices and self-doubts aside and admit that it was perfect, and that I had a lot to learn about the craft and the technical aspects of doing it..."

The conjoined twins of music and theatre allows for some unique storytelling prospects, especially for a lyricist. "What attracts me to musical theatre is its ability to tell stories in a narratively specific and emotionally heightened way," Maté said. "The lyrics in a musical are paramount, and so lyrical craft is appreciated and elevated, much more so than in most pop music. As a lyricist, that's tremendously invigorating: you know people are going to be listening closely and so you want to choose every word, every phrase very carefully. At the same time, the element of music,

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adds a depth of abstract feeling and emotional expression that isn't possible in most other theatre. When music and lyrics come together in the right way, a story can really come to life in unique and compelling ways. Songs are extremely powerful vehicles for conveying information, both conscious and unconscious. I think musical theatre has all kinds of potential that it hasn't yet realized and I'm excited to be a part of pushing the medium forward if I can.

"I also really enjoy hearing other people sing my stuff, something that was never really available in my days as a self-absorbed singer-songwriter. It's tremendously freeing and energizing to write a song for someone else besides myself to sing, and to put my thoughts and insights and experiences into the mouths of characters who aren't me. It breaks me out of the self-imposed box of thinking I'm different than everyone, and it forces me to extend my compassion and imagination to what others might be thinking and feeling."

Maté's eclectic and robust interest in song was nurtured by an appetite for diverse musical genres growing up, a cross-pollination that fuels his varied taste and the unique approach he takes to composing.

"When I write theatre songs, I try to mine the styles and traditions I love for what's theatrical in them, and deploy them in ways that serve the moment I'm writing for," he said. "If it's a hard rock song, what's the swagger all about, and are we exulting in it or is there an insecurity behind it that I want to expose or hint at? If it's a song with a rap influence, then how does the rhyme scheme and sense of flow express what the character is going through in that moment? And if I'm writing in a more traditional 'musical theatre' style – which admittedly I do at times, although I'm leery of it, mainly because most musical theatre music itself is already borrowed from other styles, so there's a danger of ending up with a copy of a copy – what's the aim, and what effect does that choice have on the listener? I never want to do anything by default: hopefully every choice pays off in ways that are both surprising and satisfying. Audiences

want and deserve to have their attention rewarded."

Bringing a song, or a show, to the stage is an involved and dedicated process – one that relies on good collaborators, as well. "Every show is different," Maté explained. "Sometimes it's a concept that comes first, or a piece of source material and some basic themes – as in my shows *The Trouble with Doug* (based on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*) and *The Story of Jo-Beth* (based on the Book of Job) – and from there I start imagining what the key song moments might be. Other times, the show's genesis is a particular ensemble of actors. For instance, I wrote a show called *Middle School Mysteries* while working with a group of young people in an after-school theatre class in New Jersey. The songs, and by extension the story, emerged out of characters that the kids themselves created, all of whom were different 'types' one might find in an average school full of 12-to-14-year-olds.

"I also have a show called *The Longing and the Short of It* that's a song cycle or revue, an evening of stand-alone theatre songs put together in a particular way that creates an overall effect or suggests a thematic coherence, but there isn't a literal 'story' being told. In that case, the songs came first and only after the bulk of them were written did I get the sense that maybe they all might fit together in some unified way."

This progression takes "a lot of time, a lot of patience, a willingness to rewrite and collaboration," he added. "Even if I'm writing the music, lyrics and book myself, musical theatre is a fundamentally collaborative discipline, and no show makes it to the stage without partnerships – with directors, music directors, arrangers, orchestrators and, of course, performers. And it's hard to overstate the time it takes. Musicals go through many stages of development – table readings, staged readings, workshops – before they ever see a production.... The craft of musical theatre songwriting is to channel one's artistic impulses into a form that will deliver with power and clarity, hopefully on the first listen (because theatre happens in real time and there's no replay button) and in a way the audience can

absorb. I do have a very vague sense of what a show might look like on a stage, or what sort of stage it might be right for, but generally that's not my biggest consideration. I just try to make the material as truthful and as engaging or entertaining as possible, and trust that the show will find its appropriate expression in the hands of people who are smarter about these sorts of question than me, like directors, designers, producers, etc. Letting go of a piece and letting it breathe on its own is magical, sometimes nerve-wracking, and ultimately the end goal with everything I write."

While the theatre scene in Canada is healthy, the centre of the

"I think musical theatre has all kinds of potential that it hasn't yet realized and I'm excited to be a part of pushing the medium forward if I can."

universe for musical theatre has always been – and possibly will always be – New York City. For the time being, Maté is more than happy to throw down some roots south of the border. The push-pull of his adopted home is cleverly and entertainingly alluded to in his song "Marry Me, America."

"The day I start missing living in Canada, I'll probably move back to Canada," he said when asked if he'd consider returning to Vancouver. "It's not that I have any great love for American politics or empire or mainstream culture ... and if I was living elsewhere in the States I might feel differently, but I'm living in Brooklyn, New York City. Culturally there's a vibrancy and diversity, and energetically an aliveness that I really feel at home around. Plus, for now at least, New York is where it's at for me, career-wise, given the field I've chosen."

"That said, I'm very excited to be coming to Vancouver to the In Tune Conference to discuss how Canada can continue to grow as a place where new musical theatre can live and develop. Vancouver,

and British Columbia in general, is a fantastic place to be from and it's always delightful to visit, especially since I have tons of family and friends here. And I would absolutely love to see my work get some traction north of the border. I'm still very much a proud Canadian at heart, even if the Harper government is doing their best to tarnish the brand these days.

"I can't say much about the state of Canadian musical theatre, because I don't know much about where it's at," he continued. "*The Drowsy Chaperone* is one of my favorite new shows of the past 10 years, and it certainly is suffused with a distinctly Canadian sensibility (whether or not the Tony voters or the Broadway public realized it).

"Recently, I've been approached by several Toronto theatre companies that are interested in producing new musicals, so that's an encouraging sign. Certainly, the existence of a conference like In Tune suggests that there's a growing interest in what the 'great Canadian musical' would look and sound like, and what it's going to take to make Canada a place where such a thing can be born and thrive. I'm really excited to take part in that conversation."

Receiving such high-profile public recognition for his work has been gratifying, Maté said. "Every one of these award wins has happened to come at a time when I was starting to question the feasibility and wisdom of my chosen path, and considering jumping ship for something more 'stable.' The thoughts go something like, 'I'm 37 years old. Do I really want to be living hand-to-mouth, asking my parents for help in lean months, wondering whether this artistic pursuit of mine is ever going to take root as an actual and sustainable career into my 40s?'"

"The Kleban in particular is a game-changer. I mean, we're talking \$100,000. That's a salary, for a couple of years at least. For the first time in my life I am actually being paid to do what I do best, on a full-time basis, meaning I don't have to spend time and energy seeking ancillary forms of income. I can really devote myself to the practice of my craft, and also the maintenance work that a career like this requires.

I can try new things on the basis of how much they excite me, not whether or not they'll help me make next month's rent. And, of course, beyond the finances of it, an award like this it opens up all kinds of opportunities for further work. I'm already feeling the effects, in terms of interest, invitations, etc.

"On a personal/emotional level, it's tremendous validation that my work is striking a chord with people, and that there's a space for me at the table of American musical theatre, which, of course, directly contradicts my own inner monologue of being an outsider, an outlier.... I'm having to rewrite my own personal underdog narrative to keep up with actual events, which is a great problem to have, honestly."

Maté has worked with his father, physician and author Dr. Gabor Maté, recording audio versions of some of his bestselling books; he also was a contributor and editor on his father's most recent book, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*.

"I'm proud of him and the impact his work is having on how people think about a range of issues," Maté said about teaming up with his father. "I used to worry that in collaborating with my father I was 'riding his coattails' or somehow suppressing my own individuality, but that was just leftover childhood anxiety, and also it was a reflection of the fact that I hadn't really found my feet in my own career, something that's obviously started to shift pretty dramatically of late."

In any case, Maté said, "When I'm recording an audiobook, I'm not working directly with him – I'm just like any voice actor, in a studio, reading the book into a microphone. I did work with him as his editor on *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* and also wrote a small section in one of the chapters; we're talking about me being involved in a more extensive way on his next book. It's a real privilege to be able to contribute in some way to the work he does; ultimately, I think we're both healers, our work just takes different forms." ❦

Daniel Maté performs Songs I Wrote in New York on Thursday, July 4, 8 p.m., at the Cultch. Tickets, \$20/\$12 (student), are available online at tickets.thecultch.com.



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