

Creating a Composition: An Interview with Eric Schorr

Virginia Stage · Behind The Scenes

Today on our blog, we're interviewing Eric Schorr, who wrote the script, lyrics, and music for the world premiere musical, *I Sing the Rising Sea!* Previously, he composed the score for *Frog Kiss* (Virginia Stage Company, New York Musical Theater Festival) and wrote the book, music, and lyrics for *Tokio Confidential*, which had its world premiere in New York City. Currently, Eric also composes music for television and film.



Could you briefly describe your education/background?

Eric Schorr: When I was about four years old, I began to play the piano by ear. Soon thereafter, I started piano lessons and studied both classical and jazz through my senior year in high school. My undergraduate degree is in Physics, but I also took a lot of music composition and theory courses. My real music-theatre education involved seeing and listening to a lot of musicals from an early age, as well as serving as a musical director of shows in college.

Could you describe your job for a theatre neophyte?

ES: For *I Sing the Rising Sea*, I wrote the book (i.e., the "play," which is also referred to as the libretto), the song lyrics, and the music. Often, in musical theatre, those tasks are undertaken by three different professionals: a bookwriter, lyricist, and composer. For my last couple of projects, including this one, I've decided to do all three jobs.

What got you into music?

ES: I've had a passion for music since I was a small child, when, as I mentioned above, I started to play the piano by ear. I listened to music whenever I could. My parents had a wonderful record collection — everything from classical music to the "standards" sung by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. And of course great Broadway shows, like *My Fair Lady* and *South Pacific*. I also loved tuning in to the radio when I was young, the waves of which in those days were filled with the songs of Carole King, James Taylor, Elton John, Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, and The Fifth Dimension, to name just a few. Truth be told, I like all kinds of music.

In the past you've focused more on the music aspect of theatre, how does the shift from just the music to the entire production change your process?

ES: Lately, I've been coming up with my own original stories as the basis for each new project. It's a challenge to write both the story and compose the music — I have to have a lot of conversations with myself, and sometimes it can be lonely being my own writing partner. But theatre is by definition a very collaborative art form. Once we begin rehearsals, I have the benefit of working with the director, musical director, actors, and designers, all of whom are invaluable in shaping the final product.

What does your writing process look like?

ES: In the case of *I Sing the Rising Sea*, my assignment was to write a musical about sea level rise. Well, that's a pretty broad mandate. First, I had to do a lot of reading just to understand the issue. But a play about an issue would, in my opinion, not be very satisfying — either for the audience or me as a writer. I needed to create a story, or set of stories, populated with compelling characters. And inventing compelling characters involves knowing the specifics of their lives. A lot of research is necessary. Because part of *Rising Sea* is set in Norfolk in the 1930s, I spent a great deal of time in Slover Library so I could understand the local history relevant to some of the characters. I also had to learn a lot about Antarctica, another location in the musical. Before I started my research, I really hadn't known anything about it — and now I'd love to go!

Once I have the outline of the story, I start to write the libretto. It is only after I have actual scenes in place that I begin to think about music and how song might enhance any given scene. In musicals, a character typically sings when speech itself isn't sufficient to express a given emotional situation.

What is your favorite part of the process, from the idea to seeing it on stage?

ES: This is a difficult question, for I actually have many favorite parts. One is when the idea for a project has "crystallized" in my brain. Also, taking a scene, or part of a scene, and transforming it from dialogue into song is very satisfying. In rehearsal, working with talented actors who make the words and music come "off the page" and onto the stage is like going to heaven. And seeing the final product, well, it's humbling. So many people work very hard to make it happen— it truly takes a village to put on a musical.

What is the hardest part?

ES: The hardest part for me is, inevitably, the close of the run. Working on a piece of theatre is an intimate experience and spawns an instant family. Having to say goodbye to that family each time a production closes is heartbreaking.

***I Sing the Rising Sea* takes place over a wide range of time periods, and this is reflected quite clearly in the music. Can you describe the different styles in *Rising Sea*, how you have tied everything together?**

ES: The action of the musical ranges from 1933 to 2047, and I attempt to make the music apropos to the relevant time period. There's some Americana pastiche, some blues, some swing. But there's also steady stream of "musical theatre" that runs through the entire piece.

What was the most noteworthy thing you learned while working on *Rising Sea*?

ES: Just like it takes a village to put on a musical, it's going to take the whole planet to make a concerted effort to counter the effects of climate change.

If there were one take away you'd like the audience to remember after seeing the show, what would it be?

ES: I don't mean to duck the question, but that's really for each audience member to decide! And I'd be curious to know what each one has to say.

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