The Outside Man

by nicole estvanik

MARITA MADELONI

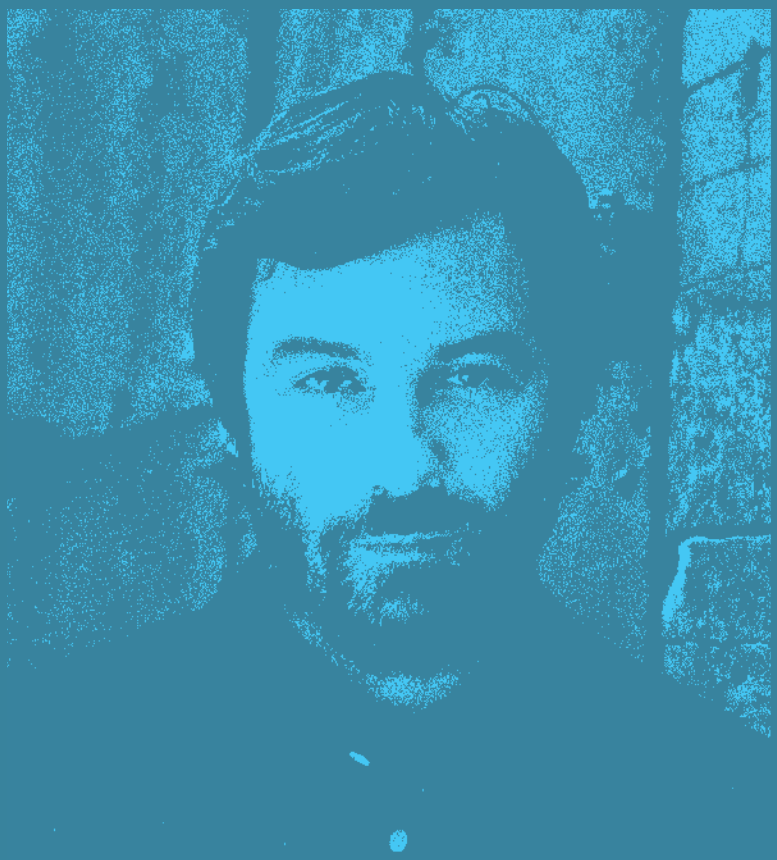
THE PLAYWRIGHT HAS JUST E-MAILED SOME NEW LINES OF VERSE TO THE MUSICIAN, AND THE MUSICIAN has e-mailed back to say he thinks this could become the most potent song in their show. It's March, about eight weeks before previews for Atlantic Theater Company of New York City's long-awaited *Spring Awakening*, a musical based on the notorious 1891 German play by Frank Wedekind about the agonies and ecstasies—but mostly the agonies—of adolescence.

It may seem odd that key numbers are being written so close to the premiere of a production that's been six years in the making (the official opening is scheduled for June 15). But creating new songs seems to happen as naturally as conversation for composer Duncan Sheik, an alt-pop recording artist, and playwright/lyricist Steven Sater. Their intense creative partnership, formed by chance, has pulled Sheik headlong into the theatre world and so far has yielded three new music-theatre projects—not to mention a hauntingly pensive album and scores for multiple movies.

Sheik's name will seem familiar to many theatregoers, most likely in connection with "Barely Breathing." That's the single that introduced the singer-songwriter to radio listeners 10 years ago, with its drum-on-the-steering-wheel rhythms, its accessible harmonies and earnest, lovelorn vocals (his clean-shaven heartthrob looks didn't hurt, either). Those hooked enough to buy his self-titled debut album discovered something more complex. Alternating between moody lullabies and fully orchestrated indie pop, the record stood apart from the grunge and treacle of mainstream mid-'90s music.

Sheik, now 36 years old, has since grown a beard—a brief but lively topic of debate on the "Sheik Freik" fansite ("Duncan the musician is definitely a beard man; Duncan the sex-symbol is definitely *not*," the site's administrator finally ruled). And he

Once wary of musical theatre, recording artist Duncan Sheik is doing his part to expand the form



"Sheik's ambient take on rock may favor piano and strings, but there's no question that his sound is well suited for expressing teen angst."

has released four more solo albums in the deepening vein of his first. The most recent, the politically tinged "White Limousine," made a small splash when it dropped in January by including software that allows fans to mix their own versions of the songs.

Album number three was unusual for the artist in that it featured words by someone else: playwright Steven Sater (*Carbondale Dreams*), a then new acquaintance from the Buddhist organization to which both belong. "I came to his house to chant with him," remembers Sater, "and I stayed for five-and-a-half hours." At the time Sater was working on a play called *Umbrage*, and Sheik offered to collaborate on a song for it. That became the basis for "Phantom Moon," which the *New York Times* called an "entrancing collection of pop dream songs." Around that time, Sater handed Sheik a copy of *Spring Awakening*, for which he'd considered writing a libretto. Controversial for its treatment of teenage sexuality, suicide and abortion, the play follows a group of young students on the brink of the unknown—we know it as puberty, but there was no sex-ed in the 19th century—wrestling with hormones and school pressures. The authority figures in their lives, some well-meaning, some malicious, exert their influence in sometimes disastrous ways.

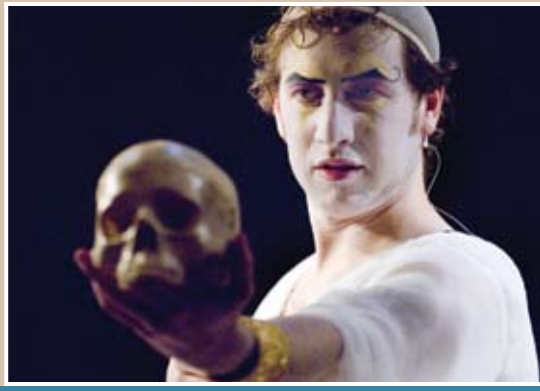
Thus began the circuitous path to this spring's Atlantic Theater production. Sater started to adapt the work from his own translation; Sheik set some lyrics to melodies. It was enough to snag a commission from California's La Jolla Playhouse and development time at the Sundance Theatre Program in 2000. But a shift in La Jolla's leadership cast uncertainty on the production's future. New York City's Roundabout Theatre Company brought it to the East Coast for a workshop performance, and by intermission had promised the team another workshop (which happened six months later), plus a full production (which, after two postponements, never did). First schedules intervened—director Michael Mayer, who'd been attached to the project from the beginning, was wrapped up in his Broadway production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*—then world events. Following Sept. 11, 2001, cutbacks at the Roundabout—and Connecticut's Long Wharf Theatre, which had planned to co-produce—set the show loose yet again. For two years it seemed no producer would touch what was, admittedly, a commercially daring project to begin with.

The show sprang back to life when actor/producer Tom Hulce took it under his wing. In February 2005, Lincoln Center presented a concert staging as part of its American Songbook series, which generated a rave in *Variety* ("a beguilingly dark musical tragedy begging to be produced") and a solid commitment from the Atlantic.

Spring Awakening is the first musical in the Atlantic's 20-year history, but artistic director Neil Pepe had been on the lookout for a piece that combined the complexity of a straight play with the event of a rock-and-roll concert. "In great rock music there was always a sense of speaking the truth," Pepe points out. Historically, rock has also provided a release for the passions and frustrations of the young. Sheik's ambient take on rock may favor acoustic guitar, piano and strings (think Coldplay, not

MONIQUE CARBONI

Composer Duncan Sheik, director Michael Mayer and playwright Steven Sater rock out at rehearsals for *Spring Awakening*.



Pearl Jam), but there's no question that his sound is well suited for expressing teen angst.

The hope is that a new kind of musical will draw a new kind of audience; the Atlantic is aiming a marketing campaign specifically at Sheik fans and will sell $10 seats (*on* stage) to attract younger patrons. The actors themselves mostly range in age from 16 to 21. Cast member Chris Garneau has been involved since the first workshop, when he was only 17, in four different roles. He recently left acting to pursue a solo music career (Sheik is producing his debut album) but has stuck with this one project because "it feels more real than any other music I've ever been a part of." Of the challenging vocal material, he says, "You have to break the rules a little bit and just go for it."

Much has been made in the press of this production's rule-breaking—for example, characters step up to microphones to deliver their songs as internal monologues—and of Sheik's resistance to the conventions of musical theatre. The phrase "anti-musical" keeps cropping up, though no one can seem to pinpoint where it came from, and Mayer dismisses the issue impatiently: "Theatre's always been about creating the rules each time. There *are* no conventions."

The duo's second collaboration, *Nero (Another Golden Rome)*—technically a play with songs, rather than a musical—showcases Sheik in a more habitual low-key mode. The piece was featured at the HOTHOUSE Festival at San Francisco's Magic Theatre this past February, following a workshop at Cornell University, where director Beth Milles is a faculty member. Stylistically experimental, the work unites Sater's love of classical sources with Milles's interest in fierce physical relationships. A modern narrator serves as guide while six actors in faded circus makeup enact the murderous machinations of Emperor Nero and his outrageous mother, in an ancient Roman government with overt Bush Administration parallels.

Magic Theatre's artistic director, Chris Smith, calls Sheik's songs the "emotional binder" that keeps this ambitious pastiche hanging together. "*Nero* is a Fellini-esque landscape with elevated text," he says, "and the most human aspect of it is the voice of the music."

"It's a way of opening a door and sneaking into a back room for a second," says Milles of Sheik's contribution. "The *Nero* world is so angry, so raw. The music is a way of petting you while telling you the most horrible bedtime stories ever."

One of the more daring aspects of that production—and one the creative team seems to agree is in need of fine-tuning in its next incarnation—is the overlay of dialogue on songs with words. The effect, when it succeeds, is compellingly cinematic, and it's hard to imagine it working with a less subtle composer. "One of the things that's really brave about Duncan's work for the stage is it doesn't force itself upon you," Smith comments.

All of this is not to say that Sheik's music can't hold its own in the spotlight. Says Milles, "I think it's a protective thing to say he's not of the theatre, but he is *wholly* theatrical." Smith concurs: "I think 'mellow' would be construed as a pejorative word to most people in the theatre. Yet if you called it evocative, or sensitive…. 'To be or not to be' is much closer to Duncan Sheik than Jonathan Larson!"

Sheik and Sater have a third project in the works: *The Nightingale*, loosely based on a Hans Christian Andersen story and commissioned by producer Martin McCallum (no director was attached at press time). Another period piece that somehow also manages to be timeless—Sater has set the tale in the Forbidden City and incorporated an allegory for the music industry—it has already been workshopped by La Jolla and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and is a candidate for La Jolla's Page to Stage program.

There is a mystical quality to Sheik/Sater creations. Perhaps this is because, in Smith's words, they share an interest in "the Romantic poets' notion of what soul is." Sheik's arrangements shimmer around Sater's luminous nouns: ghosts and angels, clouds and curtains, silver and ivory. Observes Mayer: "These lyrics unlock something in Duncan that's really quite marvelous."

For Sater's part, he's worked with other composers, including Laurie Anderson, but the partnership with Sheik "is at the heart of my life," he says. "I can write the purest *me* for Duncan. He always understands my lyrics, but he hears them in his own mysterious way."

On a recent New York morning before *Spring Awakening* rehearsal—surrounded, in his otherwise uncluttered Tribeca loft, by musical instruments and recording equipment—Sheik dispelled some of that mystery.

BILL FAULKNER

From left, Drew Hirshfield, Sophia Ahmad and Andrew Hurteau in *Nero (Another Golden Rome)* at San Francisco's Magic Theatre.

A reviewer of "Phantom Moon" said it seemed like the product of one mind. Are you and Steven really that attuned to each other?
Steven and I have this unique working relationship where he sends me lyrics, I write some music, he says "great," and we're done. There's, like, zero push and pull! (*Laughs*)

Why does it work so well?
We're both practicing Buddhists, so we're philosophically coming from the same place. And we have a lot of respect for each other. I write lyrics as well, but I wouldn't be particularly good at being the lyricist for a piece of theatre, certainly not now. And Steven has a unique voice—it very much comes from his heart. Sometimes in musical theatre things can get extremely clever and thesaurus-esque, and Steven *so* does not do that, thank god, and it keeps it from being problematic for me to have to feel good about what those words are in the context of the music.

What was your reaction when you first read *Spring Awakening*?
I didn't quite realize how racy it was. It seemed a bit archaic, you know—a bunch of schoolchildren behaving badly. But then as I got into the story more—and Steven's version makes the Wedekind much clearer—I thought there was an interesting mood about it.

Did it call a style of music to mind?
Initially we were going to do an updated version of it, but I didn't want to do a thing where the music had to be '50s or '60s nostalgia. I wanted the music to come from where I come from, stylistically. Eventually we settled on the fact that the play was still 19th century and the music was contemporary—or, let's just say, out of time.

There's a tone to that play that's different than a lot of your music.
There's a melancholy these kids have that I think does relate to what I do musically. And you can't have two hours of dark tragedy. You need moments of lightness and love and comedy and a bit of sardonic wit, and hopefully that comes through. Even though in the case of this play, it's all fraught with difficulties—there's that discovery of sexual yearning that happens in everyone, and it's kind of great, no matter what scenario you're in.

What musicals do you admire?
There are classic things I love—*Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*—and modern, untraditional, edgy things, like Laurie Anderson's *Moby Dick*. A lot of the stuff in between is not my cup of tea.

How is *Spring Awakening* untraditional?
In traditional musical theatre, songs have to forward the plot in some way. In *Spring Awakening*, when music happens, time suspends. In terms of the staging, we've tried to make that almost painfully clear. If the character is in a different place when the song ends, then we've made a mistake. For me it's a much more organic way of having music in the context of the dramatic scenario—where you don't have what I find to be that uncomfortable feeling of, "Why is this person singing?"

How about *Nero*—how does the music fit in?
Nero was a musician—in a sense, the music in that play is source music. They're singing because they *would* have been singing. I appreciate that naturalism.

In a solo concert a few months ago, you mixed your theatre songs with your album songs. If you hadn't said so, I'm not sure the audience would have known the difference.
Good!

So *is* there any difference?
Initially when I was doing *Spring Awakening* there was no difference at all. But like with any other art, you learn more about that medium, you can grow into it a little bit. Certainly *The Nightingale* sounds set apart

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from my other music. With *Spring Awakening*, by and large these are songs that wouldn't sound out of place on my own records, but when they're sung by the kids in the context of the show they take on a different life.

What is it like for you to write for theatre-trained voices?
It's hard! That's been the biggest challenge for me. I've gone on record telling cast members to please just pretend you're in a band in your high school, that you're at the Bowery Ballroom singing a rock show.

Does having multiple voices to work with change your music at all?
You can use the voices as instruments, creating colors in the course of the song. It's a valuable commodity that you don't really have when you're playing in a band. I do try to take advantage of that as much as possible—but it has to serve the song. If you gang up a lot of voices in the wrong way, it flips into, "Ugh, it's a bunch of kids on stage singing." That, again, is not my cup of tea at all. It's a very fine line between making those vocal arrangements work and not.

What's an example of Michael's Mayer's feedback to you about the music?
My tendency is to have music that's floating there…(*Hesitates*)…this harmonic material that just kind of happens. I'm just trying to make something beautiful. Michael needs more energy at certain points, and that's where I have to force myself to go more into that aggressive, indie-rock place and pull out that side of myself. You don't want to lull the audience into a trance.

Has the long road to *Spring Awakening*'s premiere been good for the show?
Screws have been tightened. We've lost some songs that I, frankly, was never quite comfortable with. And we've added songs I feel are the best in the show. The structure has gotten to a better place. We had this masked-man character, an omnipotent observer of some kind. We didn't really know who he was. And that was the big problem—neither did the audience! The masked man has been respectfully removed from the show. It *is* better and clearer for that. But let's just put it this way: This is the sixth workshop I've done of *Spring Awakening*. If I have to do another one…. (*Laughs*)

Do pieces of music always come to you in the context of specific projects?
I come up with a lot of music. Depending on what we're working on at any given moment, that's the show it goes into—if I'm working on my own record it'll go on my own record. Sometimes there's a very specific assignment. For example, in *The Nightingale* there's a song called "My Extraordinary Past" that the empress-dowager sings about all the horribly cruel things she used to do to people in her court, and it's almost like the priest song in *Sweeney Todd*. The chords and melodies themselves, they happen where they happen. Depending on where it has to go in the play and what kind of energy it has to put forth, I'll take that material and mold it.

Is Steven always the one to propose your projects?
I read a lot, but I don't read a book and say, 'Oh, this would make a great musical.' Steven definitely does. Steven will say, "Maybe we should do *The Pied Piper* as a kids' musical," or he'll say, "Read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and maybe we can do this really cool gothic art song piece." Both of which I think are great ideas, and maybe one day we'll do them.

All your theatre work to date—with the exception of scoring the Public Theater's 2002 production of *Twelfth Night*—has been with Steven. Do you intend to work with other playwrights?
For a minute I was talking to folks about working on this piece with David Henry Hwang, a musical about Bruce Lee. I was happy to have that conversation. But it's not like I'm seeking those things out.

Do you see theatre continuing to be a big part of your career?
Yeah, I do. And it's taken me six years to say that without hesitation.

What's the hesitation?
It took me a while to really see what the…it's such a cliché, but what the magic of theatre was. For that to sink in. I love making records and I really enjoy touring. I'm sure I'll continue to do that all along. But I really do feel now that one of the most enjoyable and satisfying things is to sit there, after grueling weeks of rehearsals, and to watch the performances of these workshops and to see where it's working and where it's not. That moment of aesthetic joy—as a creative person, that's really what you're after. I finally found that in the theatre. Maybe that's just me opening up to the possibilities of the form.

How does coming from the music industry affect your perspective on the theatre?
I was a little bit impolite initially about certain other kinds of musicals, things that felt to my ear musically so irrelevant to what's going on in the *real* music world. I was a bit bratty. Which I've learned not to be now! The fact is, you've got to respect anyone who's doing creative work. That being said, what Steven and I are after is something more gut-wrenching and more intense. We're trying to create a musical that is not bound by the particular style of the genre. The *Spring Awakening* CD could be in *any* section of the record store. It could be in the rock section, the classical section, wherever.

What's most important is to find a way of making those worlds fit together in a positive and powerful way. Where you'll have people who almost never see theatre coming to these shows and hearing music they can relate to because it's not a million miles away from the four CDs they bought last week.

Do you see a parallel to what you're doing and what *Rent* did, for example, or *Jesus Christ Superstar*—musicals that tapped into rock music?
It's slightly different, because I'm coming into the theatre tradition from another place. With *Tommy*, for example, you have a rock band that created some music and they turned it into a show. Or Björk's movie *Dancer in the Dark*. I think that's really where the model is, but we're trying to create our own, unique, eccentric thing.

The stated theme of *Nero* is fame. You do have a certain level of fame—have you thought about how your name on a project might affect expectations for it?
To be honest, I *don't* really think about that. I just don't feel very famous, so it's not something that enters my consciousness. The other night after rehearsal I was out with some of the cast and someone came up and said, "Can I take your picture, Mr. Sheik?" That almost never happens to me. And they gave me such grief about it for the next few days. It's all kind of silly. In particular with *Nero*, what's so funny about it is that he's an emperor and he really just wants to perform. Whereas for me—it's taken me a long time to enjoy being a performer. The whole "American Idol" aspect of our culture is truly bizarre to me, because I'm way too self-conscious to behave that way in front of other people. I'm really lucky to be in that place where I'm not famous enough that it restricts me in doing anything in my life.