

## STEPHIN MERRITT MAKES 'CORALINE' SING

**NEW YORK CITY:** When *Coraline*, based on the macabre kids' novel by **Neil Gaiman**, plays May 7–June 20 at Off Broadway's **MCC Theater**, it will mark several firsts: the first time MCC has produced a musical; the first time director **Leigh Silverman** has worked with the creative team of **David Greenspan** and **Stephin Merritt**—and the first time, one assumes, that a fiftysomething actress (**Jayne Houdyshell**) has portrayed a nine-year-old girl who wants a pair of fluorescent green gloves so much that she sings an entire song about them.

But *Coraline* is also very much in keeping with composer Merritt's track record of mixing his ideas about theatre and pop songs and producing delightfully unusual examples of both. The frontman of the **Magnetic Fields** (as well as several spin-off bands), Merritt has solid indie-rock cred. Yet critics have bestowed upon him anachronistic comparisons to **Cole Porter** for clever, left-field lyrics such as "Sometimes the good life wears thin / I wish I had an evil twin." His musical-theatre catalog over the past decade, which includes three collaborations with opera director **Chen Shi-Zheng** that toured to such arty U.S. venues as **REDCAT** and the **Lincoln Center Festival**, has been shaped by such influences as the tonality of the Chinese language and the neuroses of **Hans Christian Andersen**.

*Coraline*, about a restless girl who becomes trapped in an ominous parallel universe when she travels through a secret door in her house, is ostensibly a step in the direction of pop culture. Certainly the book's fame has grown since its 2002 publication; a graphic novel version was published last year, and a high-profile animated film by **Henry Selick** premiered a few months ago, trailed by the inevitable video-game spinoff. Merritt says he and Greenspan have tapped into such tried-and-true musical-theatre strategies as inserting couplets of spoken verse—"an old **Rodgers and Hart** trick"—but, luckily, all the quirks haven't been ironed out. "I'm not among those people who push the 'integrated musical,'" Merritt says. "I think there's plenty of time in an hour-and-a-half-long show for moments that don't tightly spring the plot forward." Thus the abovementioned green-glove song, left unresolved when the gloves are neither obtained nor mentioned again. "It's like showing a loaded gun that never goes off—you can do that in a song," he suggests, challenging **Chekhov's** famous rule.

Merritt was the one to propose a musical-theatre version of Gaiman's story to Greenspan, after he composed a song for the U.S. audiobook version titled "You're Not My Mother and I Want to Go Home." (That song, essentially a plot summary, didn't make it into MCC's show.) He may also have been primed for the project by previous musical collaborations with accordionist **Daniel Handler**, alias **Lemony Snicket**, who is the author of a series of tales about imperiled children that share *Coraline's* eerie outlook.

But each new project needs its own sonic identity, so for *Coraline*, Merritt fixated on the piano. Traditional arrangements sketch out the child's boredom at the beginning of the show. Once she enters the domain of the malevolent Other Mother (played by book writer and practiced gender-bender Greenspan), the music emanates instead from a "prepared piano"—a technique pioneered by **John Cage** in which small objects are inserted between the strings. "We play the piano with a fork," explains Merritt. "At a certain point it becomes difficult for the actors to follow the pitch." In other musicals, that might be considered an obstacle, but in Merritt's world, it's just another compositional tool: "As *Coraline's* life gets more interesting, the instrumentation gets more interesting." —*Nicole Estvanik Taylor*



From left, Leigh Silverman, Stephin Merritt and David Greenspan.