

playwrights play right

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Not many students at Coastal Carolina University know we have potential stars hiding out here on our very own campus. Professors Aaron Michael McAllister and Daryl Fazio have quietly spent the last two years writing musicals that are original in every sense of the word.

McAllister came to Coastal having already worked in New York City as a professional vocal coach and a professor of musical theatre. When Fazio, who teaches graphic design, came to Coastal, she had already written a play that was produced in New York City.

Their first collaboration "lift" which will premiere at the York Theatre off-broadway this summer, tells the story of a small town in Ohio that is deeply affected by the near-death experience of an 8-year old boy. In the twilight hours of a winter's day, Ethan falls through the ice over a frozen lake. Somehow, he is miraculously saved but no one knows by whom until Ethan claims that a "bird man" was the one who lifted him from the icy water.

Their newest show, "POPart" tells the story of a young girl from the suburbs named Kitty Katz who moves to the city to attend the

Ghetto Art School. At first she struggles to fit in, but eventually, along with her wild new friends, she learns to "let go, dig in and create." This play will have its world premiere workshop at Coastal next fall.

These musicals would not exist if it

weren't for the two talented people who created them. I recently interviewed McAllister and Fazio about how they got started, where they come up with their ideas and what their dreams are for the future. This is what they had to say:

How did you begin writing musicals together?

McAllister: It was one day, during the first few weeks of school,

I passed her office one day, I saw her door was open so

I knocked, introduced myself. I walked into her office and that was

when I saw Playbills and other theatre paraphenilia on her wall. I didn't know

of some of the pieces on the programs, so I

just said, "What are those?" and she

said, "Oh well..." very modest as

Daryl is "...those are just a few plays

that I've written."

So I said, "I'd love to read your

work."

Fazio: People say that sort of thing to me all the time and my first instinct is

to say 'oh how nice, yes...certainly'

and I don't

ever

bring it up again. If they really want to read it, they'll ask again and he did, he asked me again. So I gave him the most recent thing I had written which was a play that takes place in the Mississippi delta in the 1960s, and I didn't really think too much about it. Mostly I gave it to him because of a conversation we had at one of Eric Hall's gigs. Aaron said something about wanting to write, and I said 'I've always wanted to write a musical.' And I don't throw that kind of information around because it sounds like I'm tooting my own horn and I hate that. Next thing I know, Aaron is coming to me with my own play, saying "This would be a great place for a song!"

How different is it working on a musical compared to writing straight plays?

Fazio: The big thing that is different for me is having a partner. It's different and I like that a lot. It's fun to have that back and forth with him, someone who can back you up and keep you in check. It's like making a baby; you can't do that by yourself. Some people can write both the lyrics and music, but that's not for us. As far as writing plays... there's another part of my personality that is extremely solitary and inward. The playwriting part really answers to that part of myself.

McAllister: And something else that our collaboration also offers is she is shy and at times introverted and I can't remember if I was *ever* shy or introverted. I'm the loudmouth and she's the one who is introspective. We have two strong personalities that work well together.

"lift" is going to be off-broadway this coming summer, what do you expect from that?

McAllister: We'll rehearse it for a few days beforehand using real actors and use the Equity staged reading contract. It will be





PHOTO COURTESY OF: Daryl Fazio
Vocalists Recording During the Popart demo in NYC

at the York Theatre, which is well-known for work-shopping many successful musicals, such as "Merrily we Roll Along" and "Lucky Stiff," among others.

Fazio: A musical needs this kind of work before it can really come to life. Aaron and I can go to New York and make a thousand recordings of the music, but we still won't know how it works with the book. They're separate right now, and we don't really know what they will do when they are put together. Forget about dancing, scenery, etc. This is just about seeing how the storytelling, narrative, tempo, etc. work. We could end up doing four of five of these kinds of readings with rewrites in between. Musicals are in development for years before they make it to Broadway. A lot of people don't know that. This is an exciting opportunity for us.

Where did the concept for "POPart" come from?

Fazio: That was one that I birthed a few years ago; I have a brother who is a rock musician who said he would help

me. I went to art school, of course, and I wanted to write a musical about that experience. I knew that I wanted to use pop music to tell the story, but I had never written a musical. My brother had just started his own business and would never have the time to help me. The idea just kind of fell to the wayside for a number of years. After we finished the first draft of "lift," I wondered if it would be something that would interest Aaron so I decided to give him what I had, which I think was the first 15 pages or so. I thought it might be too strange for Aaron's taste or to be mainstream, but I was completely wrong.

McAllister: I fell in love with the possibilities of a musical set in an art school because I had just spent years teaching at Savannah College of Art and Design. The characters were so young and fresh, as were the ideas. I instantly saw how this could be a great commercial success. Taking pop music, which is what I grew up listening to and using it to tell this story fascinated me.

Fazio: It's just supposed to be fun; its for kids, it uses teenagers, multi-

cultural characters, strong roles for women and it projections of modern art. It's essentially about paintings and the whacked-out people who create them.

This past year, you traveled to New York City twice to make cast recordings of "POPart" and "lift." What was that experience like?

McAllister: It was like night and day record-

ing our fist collaboration "lift," we were funding the project ourselves so things were kind of tight. To record the piece, we rehearsed for a day and recorded for a day. We couldn't get the studio we wanted. It was a very rushed process and we could only afford three actors. It was a nightmare in many ways.

Fazio: But what you can't underestimate is having Aaron there who can be a vocal coach and demonstrate how things should be performed. Not all composers are singers themselves, but Aaron is and of course he can play the piano brilliantly 99.9 percent of the time.

McAllister: With the "POPart" demo, we actually received a grant from Coastal to fund the recording of the show. It was a much better process; we hired an amazing 10 person ensemble, and

we had three days of rehearsal with two days of recording.

It was very recently announced that "POPart" will be included in Coastal's Theatre season next year as a full workshop production. How did that come about?

McAllister: At first, I said no. It was Ken Martin's (chair of theatre department) idea. I talked with Daryl and we said, "No, it's not ready yet. We need more time to work on it." Eventually,

the whole department was for the idea, but I still declined the offer.

Fazio: That night I called him and I said, "I can't believe we turned it down!" I knew it would be a great opportunity for us to get the show on its feet and for the students to have this experience of performing in a new work. So, eventually we broke down and agreed to let the theatre department do this piece. I think it's going to be very exciting. I can't wait to see

some of these kids that I meet in the hallway here at Coastal playing the characters that I created in my mind.

What are your dreams for the future of these shows? Do you expect them to go to Broadway?

Fazio: Well, if we're going to go right to the top, then Broadway, definitely. Maybe even the Tony Awards.

McAllister: I would love to have both of these shows go to Broadway, not because it is the best place artistically, but because it is the best place commercially. There have only been seven musicals who have won the Pulitzer Prize for theatre. It has to be an original piece and with an American theme, those are the two requirements. I would cash in 15 Tony Awards for one of our shows to be the eighth musical to win the Pulitzer Prize.

To learn more about McAllister, Fazio and their musicals, visit their Web sites at poparthemusical.com and liftthemusical.com.

