# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations

UNITED KINGDOM PRODUCTION OF *LEGALLY BLONDE — THE MUSICAL*


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**The big production number "What You Want," from the London production of *Legally Blonde***

## Laughter and Lyrics—*Legally*

*Musicals by Benjamin and O'Keefe excite Broadway.*

*by* DICK FRIEDMAN

"PRETTY MUCH any Broadway producer would take a call from us if we had an idea," says Laurence O'Keefe. "Of course, it might be a short call." "Yeah," says Nell Benjamin. She imagines a pitch. "'We'd like to write an opera about Stalin.' 'Well...thanks, Larry and Nell!'"

They both laugh. Partners in art and life (married in 2001) since they met at Harvard during auditions for the improv group On Thin Ice, Benjamin '93 and O'Keefe '91 have gone from writing Hasty Pudding shows (1993's *Romancing the Throne*) to a coveted Broadway niche as musical composers and playwrights. They are on a short list of those who can reliably deliver accessible, clever, high-energy (and sometimes high-decibel) productions. "We like to write fast-moving shows in which the plot changes during the songs," says O'Keefe.

"We don't feed you the clues about how you're supposed to feel," Benjamin says. "Catch up with us. Come on the ride with us." Their biggest success to date is the sprightly *Legally Blonde*, the musical version of the 2001 Reese Witherspoon film. Their production opened in 2007, ran for 595 performances on Broadway (and thousands more worldwide), and earned Benjamin and O'Keefe a Tony nomination for best original score. With Kevin Murphy, O'Keefe wrote the musical *Heathers*, based on the 1988 film. It premiered off-Broadway this April and earned its authors a Drama Desk Awards nomination for outstanding music. Benjamin was busy working with Tina Fey at the same time on a musical version of Fey's 2004 film *Mean Girls*. "Our competing, terrifying, high-school musicals," she says. In July the couple mounted a cabaret show, *The Songs of Nell Benjamin and/or Laurence O'Keefe*, at Manhattan's 54 Below supper club.

And that opera about Stalin? In 2012 Benjamin and O'Keefe introduced a small-scale production of *Life of the Party*. Set in the Soviet Union in 1953 and chronicling the making of a socialist-realism movie musical, it's a tragedy with a heavy dose of black comedy. The score resounds with grand opera, old-fashioned adventure music, and dead-on socialist-realism prattle:



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"Our progress is extraordinary/Our cast and crew energetic./ They do all that's necessary/To form a unified aesthetic."

In 2001, O'Keefe revealed his protean talents in the music and lyrics for what became one of the theater world's most unlikely recent cult successes: *Bat Boy: The Musical.* That venture grew out of supermarket tabloid story alleging the discovery of a cave-dwelling humanoid who escapes into civilization. O'Keefe turned the premise into an affectionate sendup of show music. From the opening number—"Hold Me, Bat Boy!"—which wouldn't be out of place on a Led Zeppelin album, he runs through a cornucopia of musical idioms. He has gleefully pleaded guilty to borrowing from, among others, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein '39, D.Mus. '67, Frank Loesser, Kurt Weill, Alan Jay Lerner '40 and Frederic Loewe, Gilbert and Sullivan, plus the rock world's Bad Company, Boston, and Queen. "My musical influences. I've been stealing from them ever since college," he says cheerfully. "You might hear a chord from *West Side Story*, but Bernstein stole that from *Petrushka*...When [in *Bat Boy*] it was time to show the simple townsfolk of West Virginia, there'll be a country sound. When it was time for the terrible dark secret from the past to erupt, you'll get grand opera. So content dictates form."

But he constantly strives for a twist. "You can have a song with a very traditional harmonic structure and a very traditional melody," O'Keefe explains. "Put a weird timbre on it and a cool new beat, and you have a brand new sound....The novelty itself sparks a new kind of emotion. Nell keeps me honest." And vice versa: they amiably finish each other's thoughts and punch lines, aided by what Benjamin labels their "shorthand."

Both grew up close to the New York City theater scene. After college they worked for 10 years in Hollywood on sitcoms and TV movies, then moved back to Broadway. Along the way they had to learn to lose some of the trappings of their Harvard fields of concentration, English (hers) and social anthropology (his). "It was weird for us to realize that words come last," recalls O'Keefe. "We were told, 'Yeah, thanks for the five-minute patter song with a thousand syllables...audiences aren't gonna like that.'"

The need to discard also came into play on *Legally Blonde*, says Benjamin: "At one point we wrote a rather ingenious song about passing the LSATs. It was *very* well-crafted...and [everyone was] totally uninterested." As they compose in their Manhattan apartment, where they live with their 20-month-old daughter, Persephone, the couple tolerate each other's meddling—usually. "If I'm working on a lyric that doesn't have music yet, and he's

OPEN BOOK

## The Brink of Revolution

**How to** make sense of the U.S. Supreme Court? "Judicial opinions…can defy easy comprehension," write Loeb University Professor Laurence Tribe, who often argues cases there, and Joshua Matz, J.D. '12, in *Uncertain Justice: The Roberts Court and the Constitution* (Henry Holt, $32). "It doesn't help that in controversial cases, the Court frequently erupts in a confusing cacophony of competing writings. Nor do its opinions always offer a comprehensive and transparent view of the Court; sometimes they are downright misleading." They attempt to deal with the uncertainties. From the prologue:

ISTOCK

**H. L. Mencken** reputedly said, "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong."

Understanding the Supreme Court undoubtedly qualifies as a "complex problem." The nine justices currently issue more than 70 opinions every year, some of them thunderbolts that rock American life and others rightly destined for obscurity. With a hand in nearly every major issue of our time, from privacy and affirmative action to gun rights and health care, the Court is inescapable. Yet it is also mysterious and secretive, committed to rituals and reasoning that even experts struggle to understand. Its opinions are poked and prodded, examined under a microscope and held up to the light. The public hangs on to rumors of backroom drama, while scholars read tea leaves and prophesy the future. Clear trends predominate in certain areas of law, but efforts to develop a unified field theory of the Court…inevitably fall short. Even in this age of statistical models that seek to wring hidden meaning out of human behavior, the nine men and women who make up the Court intrigue and surprise us.…

Of course, an effort to understand the Roberts Court…must reckon with more than just its results. The Court issues opinions in which the justices grapple with fundamental principles, argue over what the Constitution means and what role they should play in giving it life, and offer signals of where they are heading. These opinions open a window into the justices' hearts and minds, giving us a glimpse of how they view the world.…

In some important domains of constitutional law, a majority of the Roberts Court stands on the brink of revolution yet seems profoundly uncertain about whether and how to proceed. In other domains, it has already initiated major changes whose long-term effects are clouded in mystery. Some of these developments reflect a desire by the justices to remake our constitutional understanding, while others have been forced by dramatic cultural, technological, and political upheaval.



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**(Right) Two scenes from Benjamin and O'Keefe's improbable musical *Life of the Party*, set in the Stalinist USSR of 1953. (Far right) The creative couple**

COURTESY OF NELL BENJAMIN AND LAURENCE O'KEEFE

working on different music, I have to be in another room," says Benjamin. "Otherwise my lyric will scan to whatever's coming out of the room next to me."

"Either one of us might propose a lyric," says O'Keefe. "The tunes can come from either of us. The job of polishing the music usually falls to me. We don't write the lyric first and then the music. We write the first verse of the lyric and maybe the first chorus of the lyric, then turn it into music...which changes the lyric. We go back and write the second verse and second chorus. I might say, 'OK, You have eight syllables, then three...can we make it more like six and two, because I have a cool melody which you're suggesting.' It literally bounces back and forth, very fast...music/lyric, music/lyric."

Consider "What You Want" from *Legally Blonde*. "I didn't know the tune yet," says Benjamin, "but I knew the scansion." O'Keefe adds, "When I heard it, I said, 'Where's the chorus?' It needs a chorus! You have thousands of ideas bouncing off each other and now we need a moment that's repetitive, memorable, and witless—as a break from all the wit. '*What you want, what you want, what you want is right in front of you!*' That's what they'll remember." The finished number became a show-stopping centerpiece while meeting O'Keefe's top criterion: "Try to start a song with a bang or a surprise and then end with a bang or a surprise."

Producers can expect many more calls from the team. "We have a backlog of 10 to 20 ideas that we love," O'Keefe says. "We're trying to build a larger tent to contain the things we want to talk and sing about."

# Bears, Oars, Metaphors

*John Casey explores woods and stories.*

While studying with Kurt Vonnegut at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the late 1960s, John Casey '61, LL.B. '65, enjoyed quite a range of experiences. A neighboring farmer taught him to castrate pigs; the next day in class he was reading Proust. Such contrasts were hardly a shock to the budding author. As a boy, he'd stayed in the New Hampshire woods with his Uncle Charlie, who taught his nephews to fish, hunt, and cross-country ski. Young Casey also frequented Paris, home to his Uncle Drew, a highly cultured gay man and denizen of the Left Bank who, with two of his equally cosmopolitan friends, took the boy around the City of Light. "Then it was back to the woods," he says. Now, at 75, Casey proffers a concise bio: "One-third of my life is writing and reading, one-third is getting outdoors, and one-third is...just life."

The "just life" part includes his three marriages and four daughters. The rest of Casey's trifecta shines in a pair of new books. *Room for Improvement: A Life in Sport* describes the wild outdoor adventures he has pursued across more than 50 years as an "adrenaline junkie." *Beyond the First Draft: The Art of Fiction* is crammed with stories and ruminations on creative writing, a subject Casey (johndcasey.com) has taught at the University of Virginia since 1972. He knows the craft intimately, having published five novels, including *Spartina*, a summer saga of a coastal Rhode Island "swamp Yankee" and his adventures spearing swordfish, building a boat, and dealing with love, which won the 1989 National Book Award; one novella; and a raft of nonfiction that culminates in this year's two-book salvo.

Their author is an unusual athlete. Though it involves some bona fide sports, *Room for Improvement* narrates an astonishing collection of what might be called adventures. At age 30, for example, he and his wife lived four years on an island in Narragansett Bay in a house without electricity, furnace, or telephone. One night there, Casey, rowing a skiff, guided a lost, and probably drunk, stranger's yacht through two miles of rocky water to a marina. On his fiftieth birthday, he celebrated by walking 50 kilometers through the Blue Ridge Mountains from midnight to eight A.M. in January. Casey acknowledges the appeal of several popular incentives for athletic exploits: health, vanity, mastery, playfulness, and the siren song of endorphins. In addition, "I wouldn't write if I didn't read a lot," he notes in *Room*'s preface. "I also wouldn't write if I didn't get



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