

# Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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**Miller in his new theater, and (clockwise) scenes from recent productions: *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Hands on a Hardbody*, *Jerry Springer*, and *High Fidelity***

## Meet Him in St. Louis

Scott Miller "saves shows from Broadway"

by MEREDITH REDICK

**S**COTT MILLER '86 dreams of producing an absurdist musical called *Promenade*. The author, Maria Irene Fornés, recorded a series of nouns on index cards and then randomly selected from the stack to write each scene. "It's so bizarre," he says, grinning and leaning back against the show posters that line the walls of his home office. "Honestly, I'm terrified that no one would actually come to the show." The pros-

pect of a theater devoid of patrons doesn't dull Miller's smile. The self-described "bad boy of musical theater" has earned a following in his hometown, St. Louis. And New Line Theatre, the nonprofit company he founded, recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and moved into its first permanent home.

Miller began his career as a teenage usher at what was then the city's only professional musical-theater company. For eight

consecutive summers, he guided patrons to their seats and listened to family-friendly productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Itching to tackle "more challenging, adult stuff," he arrived at Harvard ready to start a concentration in musical theater, only to learn there wasn't one. "It didn't even occur to me to ask," he says. He briefly considered transferring before learning that the College would fund student productions. Then he proceeded to stage what he calls "guerilla theater" in common rooms, libraries, and wherever else he could find space. "Because there was no theater department, there was no control," he says. "It was wild and really cool."

After graduation, Miller opted against

O P E N B O O K

# The Mammalian Life Span

(Liveright, \$25.95), with this vivid challenge to humans' self-perception, from the beginning of "History Redefined" (chapter 16):

**History is not** a prerogative of the human species. In the living world there are millions of histories. Each species is the inheritor of an ancient lineage. It exists in a point of space and time after a long journey through the labyrinth of evolution. Each twist and turn has been a gamble with the species' continued existence. The players are the many ensembles of genes in the population. The game is the navigation of the environment in which the population lives. The payout is the share of breeding individuals in the next generation. The traits prescribed by the genes that sufficed in past generations might in the future continue to do so, but might not. The environment is also changing. In new environments the genes may keep on winning, allowing the species to survive. Or not. Some of the variants of the genes, having arisen by mutation or forming new combinations, might even cause the species population to grow and spread. But at any time in a changing environment, the species could lose this game of evolution, and its population would spiral to extinction.

The average life span of a species varies according to taxonomic group. It is as long as tens of millions of years for ants and trees, and as short as half a million years for mammals. The average span across all groups combined appears to be (very roughly) a million years. By that time the species may have changed enough to be called a different species, or else it may have split into two or more species—or vanished entirely to join the more than 99 percent that have come and gone since the origin of life. Keep in mind that every surviving species (including us) is there-

**Pellegrino University Professor emeritus** Edward O. Wilson has written with increasing urgency about mankind's disruption of the biosphere, and the heedless extinction of species. He continues the argument in *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*



GUY FRINGALI/ISTOCK

**Looking up:** For all their evolutionary advantages, mammalian species have shorter life spans than ants and trees.

fore a champion in a club of champions. We all are best of the best, descendants of species that have never turned wrong in the maze, never lost. Not yet....

The human species, of course, has an evolutionary history, which reaches very far back in time beyond traditional recorded history. We, too, are the twig-end of a phylogeny. The multitudinous stories of human cultures are epics in the usual sense, but you will understand that the traits of human nature that have molded these stories are also products of evolution....The two levels, biological and cultural, flow one into the other. This is the reason that history makes no sense without prehistory, and prehistory makes no sense without biology.

a move to New York, electing instead to launch his career away from the entrenched norms of Broadway. Partly because costs were lower, St. Louis was a "safe space" for the kinds of rule-breaking productions he wanted to stage. "If it's bad," he says, "it's bad in St. Louis." He founded New Line in 1991. The early years were challenging. Making money by writing and directing edgy theater in small venues across the city was almost impossible, but Miller became skilled in the financial acrobatics necessary to keep the company afloat: "We figured out we could do one show that might tank, like *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, and then something that was more secure financially, like *Bonnie and Clyde*."

Beginning in 2008, the company earned national attention for reviving Broadway flops. Miller became infatuated with the cast album for a new show called *High Fidelity*, adapted from Nick Hornby's novel. Curious to find out why it tanked on Broadway after just 13 performances, Miller dug up a bootleg video of the production, concluded that the "original director was just awful," and reached out to the composer and lyricist about getting the rights. They were surprised but thrilled that he wanted to resuscitate their show.

*High Fidelity* made its second debut in a raucous, pared-down production that sold out almost every night of its three-and-a-half-week run. Following that hit, New Line revamped two more shows with short-lived Broadway runs: *Cry-Baby*, adapted from the John Waters film, in 2012, and *Hands on a Hardbody*, about a Texas contest in which participants vie to win a truck, in 2014. Each of the re-crafted productions drew enough attention that directors all over the country began seeking his advice. "We've accidentally become this company that saves shows from Broadway," he says.

In the theater world, Miller's faithfulness to scripts is uncommon. Many directors cut chunks from shows—even from hits—to save time and hassle, or to broaden appeal. New Line's associate director, Mike Dowdy, says he's never seen Miller cut a line from a production. When something feels wrong, Miller scavenges for past versions of scripts, tracks down writers and lyricists, and scours the Internet for anything that helps provide useful context. He relied on the memoir of an addict in early 1990s New York City to shape his interpretation of *Rent*. For *Hair*, which

New Line has produced several times, he scrounged up a first-person account of an LSD experience to help his actors bring the psychedelic scenes to life. As Miller does more research, “he gets more and more excited, and that fuels us,” Dowdy says. “He’s really about creating a world for the actors to live in.”

Miller’s production choices strategically highlight each story’s social relevance. His version of *Rent* offers one example. For the set’s focal point, he requested a vast round platform painted to look like the moon. The platform represented everything from a table to a dance floor to a state of limbo for characters forced to navigate lives shattered by addiction and disease. He also cast unusually young actors, judging that the show’s wrenching narrative was much sadder that way.

According to Miller, shows like *Rent*, which debuted in 1996, are part of a new age of musical theater created by writers and

lyricists who spurn commercial norms and turn instead to productions focused on social and political issues. “People were writing these shows that felt like old-school musicals, but with new dark, ironic content,” he says. “It was happening all around the country, but all the little pieces didn’t know about each other.”

New Line started as one of those pieces, a radical Midwestern theater lonely in its mission. But after two-plus decades operating out of church basements and college theaters, it finally has a permanent brick-and-mortar home. The Marcelle Theater is tucked inside a renovated warehouse on a gentrified street in the city center. Designed especially for New Line thanks to local philanthropists Ken and Nancy Kranzberg, the facility

New Line’s 2014 production of *Rent*



holds a black-box theater, rehearsal space, studios, and offices. New Line inaugurated the space in November with its sold-out production of *Heathers*. Next up is *American Idiot*, opening in March.

As for his dream production of *Promenade*? Well, Miller says, “We’ll do that one when we have \$20,000 in the bank.”

## Exact Changes

*Musicians Damon & Naomi’s many pursuits*

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

**I**N 2002—the year the Argentine peso collapsed, eliminating half the scheduled shows in their South American tour—husband-and-wife bandmates Damon Krukowski ’85 and Naomi Yang ’86 flew to neighboring Brazil to play the rest of the dates. The trip was a risk; Brazil’s economy was also faltering, and they knew they might not get paid. But they loved Brazilian music, they’d dreamed of seeing the country, and the promoter who invited them was, in Krukowski’s words, “a lovely man.” Other bands might have canceled, but, Yang says, “I think in general we’re curious.” They went.

In the end, the promoter couldn’t pay. He’d guaranteed their fee in American dollars, and Brazil’s soaring inflation put it out of reach. As the tour drew to a close and they headed for the airport, Krukowski asked the promoter to send him instead a classical guitar that had caught his eye in a São Paulo shop, a beautiful instrument with nylon strings and a luminous body. (He knew that the man, who happily agreed, could barter for it.) “And now,” he

**Damon Krukowski and Naomi Yang**

says, “I have this marvelous Brazilian guitar. And it’s changed how I play my other guitars, how I write songs.”

That episode is not really so unusual for the couple in their plural pursuits. Krukowski is also an essayist and poet; Yang, the daughter of photographer John Yang ’54,

is also a photographer, as well as a graphic designer and filmmaker. Together they run a small press. Their modus operandi is curious more than cautious, headlong, willing to take a chance on the unknown.

The pair formed the influential indie-rock trio Galaxie 500 with fellow Harvard alumnus Dean Wareham ’85 in 1987: Krukowski on drums (lacking a drum kit at first, he famously borrowed one from classmate Conan O’Brien), Yang on bass, and Wareham on guitar. They had been high-school friends in New York City, listening to punk, post-punk, and New Wave music:



Photograph by Stu Rosner