



Erik Orton

INTERVIEW BY **WADE FOSTER** | PHOTOS BY **NATASHA LAYNE BRIEN**

WEB: ERIKORTON.COM, BERLINTHEMUSICAL.COM

Erik Orton is a writer and producer for the theatre. He began producing theatre while a student at BYU. Works he has written and produced include Berlin, an original musical about the Berlin Wall, which went on to win an Emmy Award in 2009, and The Drummings, written in collaboration with Joshua Williams and based on the life and times of Irish statesman Daniel O'Connell. Orton also co-wrote the book for Savior of the World and recently completed a script entitled The Bottom of the Barents Sea about the international rescue effort to save the crew of a downed Russian nuclear submarine. He is currently producing Children of Eden for Broadway. Erik and his wife Emily live in New York with their five children.

How did you first get interested in theatre?

It was a complete accident because I was on the swim team in high school. But I sang in choir, and they always need more guys for the shows, so my buddies signed me up to audition for *Anything Goes* and I went in. My first audition I sang the baseline from a madrigal and got the lead role as Billy Crocker in *Anything Goes*.

Isn't Billy a tenor?

Yeah, but you know, they were pretty desperate. So they picked me, and I never looked back. I stopped doing swim team,

although I still swim, but got the theatre worm, or bug—sorry, the theatre parasite—and just did everything. That's actually when I started writing music for the theatre. We were doing a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I was playing Bottom and there's a little snippet of lyrics where the fairy queen sings a lullaby. The director knew I was musical, so she said, "Can you write the music for this and all the fairies will sing your song?"

So I wrote it and we recorded it with a tape recorder on top of the piano — it was very high tech — and that's what they played in the

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production. I thought that was so cool, so immediately I decided that what I wanted to do was be a musical theatre writer. It took me years before I actually wrote a show, but that was the beginning.

Did you find that music composition came very naturally for you, or was it a challenge in any way?

I actually don't feel like I'm a natural writer. I mean, I never played by ear, I had to understand the grammar of what I was doing. But it's really just about exploring and trying and failing and trying again and there's no real true training program for this sort of thing. You say, "What is this dance about? What is this song about? What is this moment about?" And you have to really craft that moment.

I think Stephen Sondheim said it best when he said, "Content dictates form." Whatever you're writing about is what guides you towards how you write it. I've always felt that at heart I'm a storyteller. I've never been interested in writing music that didn't have a story attached to it. The music must, must, must serve the story.

Speaking of Stephen Sondheim: Who has been an inspiration to you, musically or artistically?

That's a really good question. I know a lot of musical theatre writers are inspired by Sondheim and I would say that I am, in a unique way. I met him once. He was speaking at the ASCAP panel discussions and he was so full of life. So many of his stories are very sad and dour, but he was just one of the most vibrant people I have ever met. I had a chance to speak with him on the street afterwards as he was getting into a cab and he was very friendly and very encouraging. So I was inspired by the vitality of him in person.

But from an actual writing standpoint, one of my first jobs in

New York was working for Stephen Flaherty when they were workshopping *Seussical*. *Ragtime* is one of my all-time favorite shows, so getting to work with him on the heels of *Ragtime* and seeing him and Lynn Ahrens in the studio and in rehearsal — that was my introduction to New York.

His music is so intricate and beautiful, but as a young composer, seeing somebody accomplished going back and revisiting their own work and saying, "This can be better, this can be improved," somehow it just opened a little door for me and I felt like, "Okay, this is it."

And so as I got to work on Broadway shows and see Broadway people do their work, I started to see that these are real people. It made me realize that you just chart your own course and put it out there and put a lot of heart and soul into it. It's not rocket science. It's art.

How do you choose the topics that you address in your work?

It comes from various directions. The very first show that I wrote, I didn't know what to write, so I asked my wife what she would like to see a musical about and she said she'd love to see one about the story of Esther. And so I just wrote it, because I wanted to write *a* show.

After that I met Josh Williams and we were really excited about writing together. We both had a few projects we were cultivating, so we presented what we had in the pipeline. He had developed act one of a script, and we decided that we were going to take that and turn it into a musical. It was set in Ireland in the 1800s, which is a very fascinating period of history, just before the Irish potato famine. There was Protestant-Catholic conflict, and we discovered this man Daniel O'Connell who was at the very center of it. As I learned



about him through the research I became inspired by him. I'm really only interested in stories that I find inspiring and uplifting for me, something where in the process of writing it, I feel like a better person for having told the story.

And Daniel O'Connell was the predecessor to Gandhi, to Martin Luther King Jr.; he was the first person on the heels of the French Revolution to introduce this idea of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance. He was fighting for the rights of Irish Catholics and it terrified the Protestant English to see the Irish actually being organized and civilized.

Telling his story really changed my life. And so that's one of the shows that I'm most proud of.

What was the name of it?

That was *The Drummings*. The next

one was a project for the Church where they wanted a Christmas piece and an Easter piece, so the topic was chosen for us, but how we went about it was up to us as the writing team.

And so we wrote the Christmas Story and the Easter Story together as a show, which, as far as I know, still runs at the Conference Center to this day, at Christmas-time at least.

That was a very different experience, writing with a larger team, but also having a firm production schedule and plan and the resources available for a production.

It was the first show I'd been involved with where I didn't write the music — I worked mostly on the script and some lyrics. Maybe sixteen bars of music I wrote ended up in the show. Dave Zabriskie, who is a very talented composer, wrote the

score. But, you know, that was very satisfying because we had a twenty-piece orchestra and a full set and a costume shop. And we had sell-out audiences, and it was just a thrill to see the blueprints go through to the real-life creation. After that experience I felt extremely confident knowing how a show could come to life from just an idea in your head, to a plan on paper, to a real-life production.

Once that was over, I had another show that I had written on my own while I was at BYU that I wanted to produce here in New York, and that was *Berlin*.

Tell us more about *Berlin*.

It was the most personal story I've written to date and I'll tell you why. First of all, it was one of those shows where when I started writing, I knew that I wanted to tell this



story. Originally I wanted to tell the story of how the Berlin Wall came to be, but I knew that I was still learning about writing, and I just didn't have the skill set to do it justice. I was happy to let it be on the backburner until I got through some of these other projects.

Actually, I had written a draft of it while I was at BYU. In the course of all of those playwrighting classes that I took, I wrote the script and started to sketch out some of the songs, but it really goes back to when I was a child living in Germany.

My dad took me on a trip with his scout troop to Berlin, so I got to see Communist Europe as a child and it made a huge impression on me. We were on a train, and my dad woke me up in the middle of the night and he had me look out the window. We were stopped in some switchyard in East Germany and he said, "I want you to see this because you may never have another chance in your life to see this part of the world and I want you to remember it."

In some ways people think that I'm interested in sort of dark stories, but I actually was talking with my wife about this and was able to articulate it in a way that I think makes sense, because I don't think that I'm a particularly dark person. It's that I'm interested in moments where the worst of circumstances bring out the best in humanity. I feel like those are usually ugly situations, but we get to see the beautiful side of humanity. It's juxtaposed with the ugliness that occurs and the ugly things that people do, but I think that's how we can truly see the good and the divine that is within all of us.

Berlin grew out of this experience that I had as a child, and on my mission when I thought, "Oh, I want to write shows," I started sketching it out. I had this whole scene planned out where a play

was going to be going on and the Russians were going to come in and take over the theatre and say the border was now closed. I was just making it all up, but then I started to go and do research and I found these amazing true stories, and out of that I tried to extract the essence of what actually happened.

Sometimes true-to-life, historical characters will come out of that and come with the storytelling, but it's really about trying to capture the feeling that I get as I do the research. I learned about the history behind the Berlin Wall and how it began. The Russians were allies with the British and the French and the Americans in World War II, but once the war was over and they didn't have an enemy to unite them, they became enemies and it developed into the Cold War.

As somebody who lived in Germany at the time because there was a cold war, part of it was exploring my own past and understanding why my life had unfolded the way that it had. From then on, whenever I seek out a story, I think of it as something that strangely enough has some connection to my life, and then I feel like I have a reason to share it.

Because it has blessed my life, it's brought me a gift, and I want to give that gift back to other people through telling it in a way that is compelling. Sometimes I've said it's discovering unknown chapters of history and bringing out unknown heroes, finding inspiring people, and putting them in the limelight.

How does the gospel affect your work?

On *The Drummings*, the producer was a devout Catholic. So she wondered how two nice Mormon boys came to write a musical about Irish Protestant-Catholic conflicts. We kind of looked at each other and said, "I don't know!" But I'll be very candid: I've never been interested

in writing about pioneer history. I don't reject it — it's clearly part of my heritage — but my mother's from Finland. She came to New York when she was a teenager and then later met my dad upstate and they got married. I lived overseas, so I never saw Utah until I was a teenager. I've always felt more at home in other parts of the world.

But one of the things that somebody said to me about *The Drummings* was that they'd never seen a more gospel-infused show in their life, even though it was about Catholic-Protestant conflict. I think that as an artist, if we create something that is truly honest, the light of our work can't help but be refracted through the lens through which we see the world.

And so I'm convinced that my faith and my beliefs, no matter what I do, will always appear in my work, regardless of the topic, regardless of the theme.

Also, I think that I have a fairly universal view of how those things apply to the world. I believe that we are all God's children, and so my target audience is the world. I want to tell stories that will speak to a lot of people. So I'm very excited about the story that I'm working on now, which is *The State of the Union*. But I only agreed to write it when as we talked about it we came to the idea of how this story really can reach a universal audience. I wouldn't feel comfortable writing this script unless I felt like it could play on a stage in New York, Chicago, or London and resonate with an audience.

This show is not being written for an LDS audience, in my opinion. I hope they come. I hope they love it. I hope they enjoy it. But I'm writing for, and I always have written for, the broad spectrum.

And really, you can never force anything on an audience. Even audiences have their agency. They have to be able to engage in

the story, and they can't feel like they're being spoken at.

So how I write is to hopefully draw people in and have them engage. People will extrapolate from it what they need to hear.

In that sense it's very much like the scriptures. You can see a show or read a verse of scripture at different points of your life and it's going to mean something different. And it's going to mean something different to each person.

I think the wonderful thing about it is that each person can feel and sense and experience the things that they need.

How do you balance being an artist, a storyteller, and a producer with working full-time and being a husband, a father of five, and a bishop?

Some of the best advice that I ever came across was in a book called *The 4-Hour Workweek*. It said that the way to be less busy is to do fewer things.



First of all, I'm not convinced that I'm necessarily successful in that balance, but two things: One, I feel like what I strive to be is the same person in all instances, in all situations. Certainly when I'm in my bishop's office I wear a suit, and when I'm writing I don't wear a suit, but I feel like I have to be the same person inside in every situation. I really try to just focus on doing the essence of each of those things.

For example, last night we hosted an FHE at our apartment for the singles ward. The place was filled with people from the ward, and we had a great time. Our daughter came for the lesson, and then one of the guys who is a concert violinist pulled out his violin and we played music. I'd been writing some songs on the guitar with my kids and so I played guitar and they sang. Then they all went away, and we cleaned up the apartment and sat down and did our scriptures and our prayer. After that, Emily read chapters out of *Narnia* to the kids.

Moments like that, you just feel like it's all of one cloth. I try to not have too many borderlines between the different areas. All the aspects of your life need to be integrated, so that the artistic part is not separate from the father part, which is not separate from the provider part. And when all those aspects of your life become integrated, you don't feel conflicted. But that's a process, and I'm not there yet.

So, what's next?

Well, I've got *State of the Union*, which is being written. But the thing that I've completed most recently is a play that I call *The Bottom of the Barents Sea*, which is the body of water that's just north of Russia and Norway and Finland.

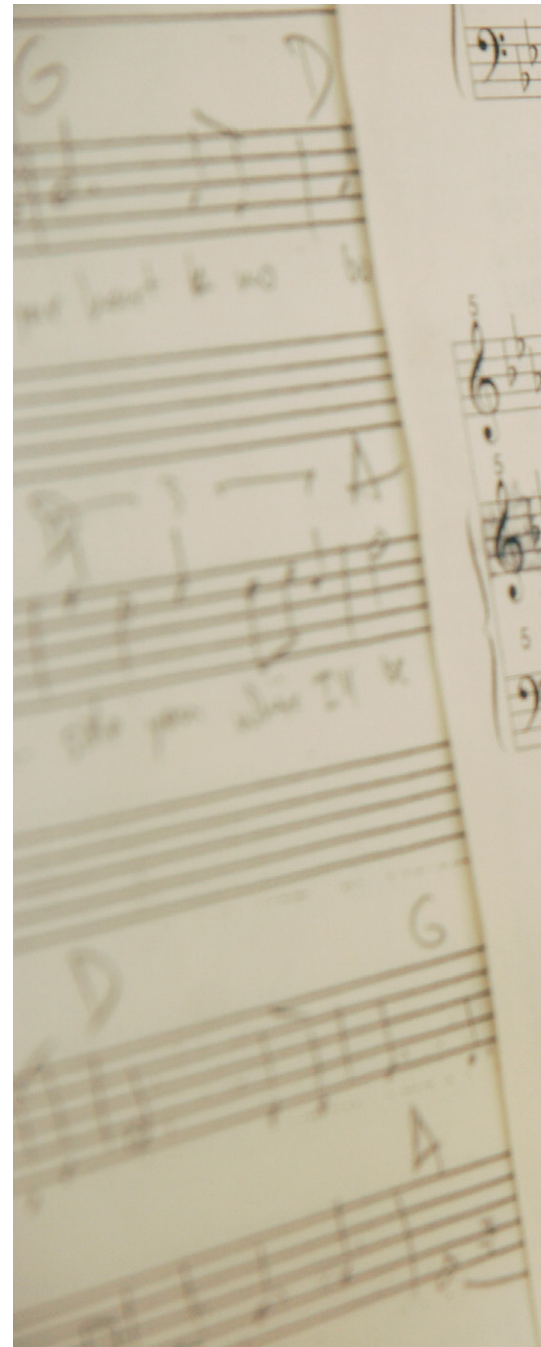
I keep a little file of things that I'm interested in writing about, and

in the year 2000 there was front-page news about a Russian submarine that sank off the Russian coast with the entire crew inside. It was in shallow water, completely rescueable, but for various reasons they weren't able to get the submarine up off the bottom of the ocean and they weren't able to get the crew out.

I became captivated by this whole story of what must it have been like for these men who were inside the submarine. At the beginning you think this is a dark, depressing story. It's a tragedy about how they're not able to rescue these men for all kinds of engineering reasons both on the surface of the water and below it. And also political issues and people not wanting to coordinate help and not wanting to let help be offered — things that have nothing to do with saving lives. It has to do with pride.

I discovered that at the center of the story is this beautiful friendship between the Russian admiral who's the head of the northern fleet and the Norwegian admiral who's there. And the Norwegians are offering help, and this admiral wants to accept the help. They know each other personally, they're friends, and they're trying to save these several hundred men who are slowly dying below the surface of the water, and it's about all the things they're able to overcome in order to do that.

It's about overcoming — in the case of the Russian admiral, having to overcome his own fear at the consequences of his actions as he thwarts the Kremlin to try to do what he thinks is going to be in the best interest of his men. And also the pride that he has to overcome, because this is a humiliating moment when you have your own men in your own water and you can't rescue them and you have to ask for help.



Going back to the idea of integration, I just thought, it's so much about asking for help. And it's there. Every Sunday I sit in my office with people who have to overcome their own fear and their own pride with certain things. They come to their bishop and say, "I need help."

All of a sudden this story that was about something totally different became very personal. It has moved me as a person, it has



inspired me, and I feel like now I want to make sure that people have to chance to see this story. It's going to mean something different to them, but that's the beauty of it. That's what I want.

And in the process I got to meet these amazing people. I got to interview the British commodore who was there on the aircraft carrier trying to help coordinate this rescue, and I had the chance to speak with one of the American

commanders who was commanding a U.S. submarine that wasn't supposed to be there but was on a covert operation observing their military exercises.

To have these cool experiences meeting these fascinating people who are footnotes in the newspaper articles and in history — not only to meet them as real people, but also to take on this sort of transcendent, spiritual layer that resonates not only with my own life

but with what life is about, that's the most valuable part to me of the creative process and why I choose to make the effort. Like I said at the beginning, I don't feel like writing comes easy to me. It's a struggle. But once I get into it and I get to be a part of these really amazing discoveries, both for myself and hopefully creating moments of discovery for other people — I feel like it's worth any sacrifice I can make. So I do, I try. ■