The Guide
A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

The Lion
By Benjamin Scheuer

Education & Community Programs Staff
Kelley Tyler
Education & Community Programs Director
Paul J. Susi
Education & Community Programs Coordinator
Matthew B. Zrebski
Resident Teaching Artist
Brenna Warren
Education Intern

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Synopsis

One man, six guitars, and a true story of love, loss, family loyalty and the redemptive power of music. Direct from an award-winning run at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, writer/performer Benjamin Scheuer (winner of the ASCAP Cole Porter Award for songwriting) shares his gripping coming-of-age tale. Directed by Sean Daniels, The Lion is a candid, poignant, charming offering from a next-generation troubadour.

About the Artist

BENJAMIN SCHEUER is the writer/performer of the one-man musical THE LION. The show premiered off-Broadway in June 2014, and was called “the best new musical this year” by the Huffington Post, The Stage, and Playbill. It has since played in London, and is currently on tour in the United States.

The animated music video for Scheuer's song “The Lion” has won prizes at the Annecy Film Festival, The Crystal Palace Festival, and the British Animation Awards (director/animator Peter Baynton).

With photographer Riya Lerner, Scheuer is co-creator of the book “Between Two Spaces.” For details, and to purchase the book, (50% of proceeds from which go to the Leukemia/Lymphoma Society) visit www.BetweenTwoSpaces.com

Scheuer has been a writer-in-residence at the Goodspeed Theatre, the Weston Playhouse, and the Johnny Mercer Songwriting Workshop. He has toured with Mary Chapin Carpenter, and has performed at venues including Lincoln Center in New York and the Royal Albert Hall in London.

He records and performs with his band Escapist Papers, whose second album, “The Bridge,” (produced by Geoff Kraly) was released in 2014, and features music from THE LION.

Find the album on iTunes HERE. Scheuer is at work on an album called “Songs from THE LION.” He lives in New York City.

Recipient of a 2015 Theatre World Award, the 2014 Off West End Award for Best Musical, the 2013 ASCAP Foundation Cole Porter Award for songwriting, and the 2013 Musical Theatre Network Award for Best Lyrics. Nominee for two 2015 Drama Desk Awards, two 2015 Outer Critic Awards, and a 2015 Lucile Lortel Award.
Musical Therapy

Through musical involvement in the therapeutic context, clients’ abilities are strengthened and transferred to other areas of their lives. Music therapy also provides avenues for communication that can be helpful to those who find it difficult to express themselves in words. Research in music therapy supports its effectiveness in many areas such as: overall physical rehabilitation and facilitating movement, increasing people’s motivation to become engaged in their treatment, providing emotional support for clients and their families, and providing an outlet for expression of feelings.

Credit to the American Music Therapy Association

Music therapy helps relieve anxiety, emotions of cancer diagnosis

Ann Arbor - One day Gisele Bigras was a college student finishing up another year of school. The next day, she was a cancer patient faced with having one of her fingers removed.

The diagnosis: epithelioid sarcoma in her middle finger. Bigras, 19, was in a state of shock and panic. But music brought her back.

“Music has always played a huge part in my life. Music therapy helped me focus on something else other than the traumatic events of the cancer diagnosis, and just forget for an hour or so, to just go into a different world for a little bit,” Bigras says.

Bigras is one of many patients at the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center who participates in music therapy. The idea is to use music to help patients cope with physical symptoms, such as pain, reduce their anxiety and find an outlet for their emotions.

We find that patients are trying to cope with many things. They’re trying to keep it all together, and sometimes if you give them a safe environment and permission to let go, a lot can come out through that,” says Megan Gunnell, a music therapist at the U-M Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Music therapy can be as straightforward as listening to recorded or live music. It could mean playing a guitar, piano or even just shaking a tambourine. It could mean writing songs or discussing the meaning behind lyrics.

For Gisele Bigras, music therapy turned into an opportunity to write and record her own song. The song, “Back on the Ground,” covers three stages: the happiness before cancer, the chaos of diagnosis and the realization afterward that she could move on.

“Listening to it helps me realize I’m coming out of this. Everything’s fine and I can move on from here,” Bigras says.

Research in music therapy shows that in addition to helping with emotional expression, music helps reduce anxiety and perceptions of pain. Controlled studies also show that patients having music therapy show improved immune system functioning.

Gunnell points out that music goes back to the womb, where babies hear a mother’s voice vibrating, her heart beating and the natural pulse of life.

“You don’t have to have any musical background to experience music therapy,” Gunnell says. “You’re able to participate because you are naturally rhythmical. You have a lot of rhythms and melody already going on in your own system.”

Credit to the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center
Hodgkin’s Lymphoma

Hodgkin’s lymphoma starts in the lymph system, usually in a lymph node. The disease may be found because of a swollen lymph node in the neck, chest, or other areas.

The disease begins when a lymphocyte (almost always a B cell) becomes abnormal. The abnormal cell divides to make copies of itself. The copies keep dividing, making more abnormal cells that build up.

When white blood cells collect around the abnormal cells, the lymph node that contains abnormal cells becomes swollen. Abnormal cells may spread through the lymph vessels or blood vessels to other parts of the body.

Although normal cells die when they get old or damaged, abnormal cells don’t die. Also unlike normal cells, abnormal cells can’t help the body fight infections.

STAGES OF HODGKIN’S LYMPHOMA

Doctors describe the stages of Hodgkin’s lymphoma using the Roman numerals I, II, III, and IV. Stage I is early-stage cancer, and Stage IV is advanced cancer, such as Hodgkin’s lymphoma that has spread to the liver.

STAGE I

Lymphoma cells are in one lymph node group (such as the lymph nodes in the neck or armpit). Very rarely, Hodgkin’s lymphoma may start somewhere in the body other than a lymph node and lymphoma cells are found in only that one part.

STAGE II

Lymphoma cells are in at least two lymph node groups, but both groups are on the same side of the diaphragm. Or, lymphoma cells are in one part of a tissue or an organ and the lymph nodes near that organ on the same side of the diaphragm. Lymphoma cells may be in other lymph node groups on the same side of the diaphragm.

STAGE III

Lymphoma cells are in lymph nodes on both sides of the diaphragm. Lymphoma cells may also be found in one part of a tissue or an organ near these lymph node groups or in the spleen.

STAGE IV

Lymphoma cells are found in several parts of at least one organ or tissue. Or, lymphoma cells are in an organ (such as the liver, lung, or bone) and in lymph nodes on the other side of the diaphragm.

People with Hodgkin lymphoma have many treatment options. Treatment options include:

- Chemotherapy
- Targeted Therapy
- Radiation Therapy
- Stem Cell Transplant

Credit to the National Cancer Institute
The Lyrics and Musical Storytelling

Though it may be said that The Lion does not follow traditional patterns for musical theatre, a great deal of the art of the show comes from the honest writing and storytelling displayed by Benjamin Scheuer. With several awards to his name for his writing, including the Musical Theatre Network Award for Best Lyrics and the 2013 ASCAP Cole Porter Award for Excellence in Songwriting, Scheuer beautifully conveys his life story with the numbers in his one man musical show. “I’m not a virtuosic singer,” Scheuer explains. “So the thing I can bring to the table as a singer and performer is trying to find the honesty and the delivery of the lyric, which doesn’t come from flowery vocal technique. It comes from a straight forward delivery.” This simple and personal appeal brings more life to the meaning behind the words. The Lion doesn’t follow the rules of a concert, or a coffee-shop live performance, but brings to life a new form of musical theatre.

Musical Storytelling has the ability to evoke a stronger emotional reaction for its audience. The stimulating of more senses brings a larger reaction for those who witness a performance, and creates an easily retained message. The inclusion of music can also bring the audience to the desired interpretation to the message displayed in the lyrics. Benjamin Scheuer caters every song to the emotional quality of the lyrics he wrote. The audience rides along with him on the emotional journey, guided by the tone of the music.

http://centerline.net/blog/the-power-of-music-in-storytelling/

Getting to Know Benjamin

Credit to the New York Times interview with Suzy Evans

Q. GROWING UP IN NEW YORK, DID YOU SEE LIVE MUSIC AND THEATER OFTEN?
A. I went to a Gilbert and Sullivan performance with my parents at Symphony Space, and I had the extraordinary honor of playing on that very same stage this year. I played my song “Cookie Tin Banjo,” and to be on that stage, in that theater, where my father had taken me, singing a song about my father was an extraordinary honor.

Q. Who are some of your musical influences?
A. I’m a big fan of Eminem, Oscar Peterson, Tupac Shakur and Nine Inch Nails. Tupac’s on my turntable right now.

Q. “Dear Dad” is one of the most poignant moments in the show. Where does that song come from?
A. I love writing pen and ink to my friends and my family, and when Sean and I were at the Weston Playhouse [in Vermont] working on the show, I would send postcards when I didn’t know what to write. Sean said to me, “Why don’t you write a postcard to your father?” And I started crying, and so Sean made me bacon. [Laughs] And I realized that I had a really difficult time directly addressing my father. I certainly had never asked for his forgiveness or offered him my own forgiveness. I wrote a postcard to my father, and I sent it to the house where I grew up. My mother got the card in the mail and looked at me like I was a bit mad when she found it.

Q. You play six guitars over the course of the show. Why so many?
A. A lot of the songs are written in alternate tunings. So having the different guitars not only allows for the different tones, it also allows for the different instruments tuned to different chords, which allows greater flexibility of harmonic variation.

Q. You talk in the show about how clothing was a form of armor during your cancer treatment.
A. When I was very ill, I looked terrible, and what I didn’t want was for people to see me, look sympathetic and say, “You look terrible.” I wanted people to say, “You look nice.” One of the few things I could control was what I wore. I really liked suits, but I did not wear them all the time until I was diagnosed with cancer. After my father died, I used to wear his clothes all the time. It was a real way I could feel close to him. I have a fantasy that my children and my children’s children will say, “Grandpa Ben dressed so cool, and we want to wear all his clothes.”

Q. Do you feel that writing the show has helped you overcome hard times from your past?
A. I’ve gotten to know my father much better. I see him much more as a complete man with wonderful qualities and deep flaws rather than the hagiographic figure that was presented to me as a little boy. I have begun to understand my father probably because I’ve made peace with and understand myself.
Activities

SONGWRITING EXERCISES by Joel Mabus

SCAFFOLDING

Stuck? Here’s an old trick to get you going. What a good song offers is structure, repetition, form and balance. Not always easy to create, but easy to borrow. You can build on the form of another song, without sounding at all like that song. Much as a scaffold is used to frame a skyscraper — the scaffold may look familiar, but once removed yields a unique building.

Try this exercise:

A. Take some song you like — any song at all from any era, any style — just so long as it is familiar to you.

B. Write a new lyric to that song. Verse for verse, chorus for chorus, refrain for refrain.

C. Take that new lyric and write completely new music to it. Try switching keys, time signatures, tempo, etc., to remove yourself from the original.

D. Edit. Adjust your new words and melody to fit your newly established mood. Rewrite as necessary.

(Or you could do A-C-B-D — write the new music to the “scaffold” song and then write a new lyric.)

What remains is a new song with only a hint of the “ghost” song that acted as a scaffold for the process.

LISTMAKING

Out of ideas? Start a list. Pen & paper ready, start a list of practically anything — things people eat for breakfast; words that remind you of your mother; things your high school counselor told you were important; all the shades of blue — anything. Just write it down!

A list could become a song (remember “My Favorite Things” or Tom T Hall’s “I Love...”) or could be a starting pad for an essay song, enumerating facts or feelings. But more importantly, writing down a list begins to mine your unconscious — unlocking creativity. You may wind up with an idea entirely tangential to your list, but that’s O.K. The point is to get those words flowing.

FOCUSED IMAGING

Similar to listmaking, but more purposeful, is putting your imagination to work in creating a scene, place or mood.

Imagine a perfect day in your childhood – or the day your childhood sweetheart left you. What is the weather like? The temperature, the breeze, the clouds – how does your skin feel? What are the smells? What are you wearing? Who else is there? How is her/his hair fixed – what is his/her scent? What are the sounds around you? How about taste? Engage all your senses in creating the image. When you look at what you have written, is there a center to your images? What overarching image sets the theme? What phrase could capture that central image? Now you have the nugget from which a song might flow.

OUT-OF-CONTEXT IMAGES

Brain dead? Take a book off your shelf. Crack it open to page 113. Point your finger at the middle of the page and see what the word or phrase is. Any book will do; any page will do. Perhaps it is the manual that comes with your garage door opener — you see the phrase “worm gear.” Think about the image. A gear that looks like a worm. Or acts like a worm. What kind of gear does a worm need? Rain gear? Maybe the gear to catch a worm? Flashlights and tweezers on a rainy night?

Do this a few times and you start to see language in a new light. Hmm – what kind of light is a “new” light? What kinds of things would you see in an “old” light? See... it just doesn’t stop!

NEW SOUNDS

The better you know music, the better you will compose. But you don’t need to be a musical genius to make a new melody. If you find yourself in a rut, try confusing yourself — play an instrument you don’t know and make a tune on it. Or retune your guitar to an open tuning and try normal chord forms over the new tuning and hear the sounds you make.

Break your old rhythm molds. Listen to some music from another culture other than your own — whether that means listening to Afro-pop or Wisconsin polka. There is more than one beat in the borscht!

Sometimes taking a lesson or two, or studying a page or two of a book of jazz chords, or attending a concert of music or poetry you love (or you thought you would hate), can give you one new thought; just one pearl of insight that might just become your next best song.
One of the best things you can do is keep a songwriting journal. A workbook you can scribble in, daydream with, experiment with. It’s O.K. to be messy and write in the margins. But keep it — start a shelf full of journals. You will often write half a song before you decide it’s too lame to finish. Keep it. A year later look back and you might see the one line or two in it that is the real gem — the nugget from which to build a new song.

Using a computer with a good word processor may be your preference. But try to keep early versions of works. When you go back to work on an old piece, you may decide that an earlier version has more promise. And don’t forget to backup your work!

However you choose to do it, do keep track of your thoughts and remember to revisit them from time to time.

Local Resources

**OHSU KNIGHT CANCER INSTITUTE SUPPORT GROUPS AND CLASSES**

http://www.ohsu.edu/xd/health/services/cancer/getting-treatment/services/support-groups.cfm

**PROVIDENCE HEALTH SERVICES CANCER SUPPORT**

http://oregon.providence.org/our-services/p/providence-cancer-support-services/

**LEUKEMIA AND LYMPHOMA SOCIETY, OREGON, SW WASHINGTON, IDAHO AND MONTANA CHAPTER**

http://www.lls.org/oregon-sw-washington-idaho-montana-chapter

**WELL ARTS INSTITUTE**

http://wellarts.org/

**PORTLAND SONGWRITERS ASSOCIATION**

http://www.portlandsongwriters.org/