“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