Meet Him in St. Louis

Scott Miller “saves shows from Broadway”

by MEREDITH REDICK

Scott 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 prospect 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
The Mammalian Life Span

(Topright, $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-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.

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

Exact Changes
Musicians Damon & Naomi’s many pursuits

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

In 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 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.