

THE WTF YEARS

storytelling and embracing the mess with adam quinn

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Despite performing in fifteen shows before he graduated from high school, Adam Quinn never wanted to be an actor. The problem was, in his own words, that "No one wants to hire a ten year old director." He spent his youth getting into the theater world in any way he could so that by the time he was 17 and 18, people were willing to trust him as an assistant director. In the little over a year that Adam has been living in New York, he has been an assistant director and an associate director at regional and off-Broadway theaters, as well as worked on projects like *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Holiday Inn*. He is constantly juggling new projects at different stages of development, flying out of town to assist or associate direct works at the 5th Avenue Theater in Seattle and other regional theaters, and is relentlessly searching for story inspiration in his everyday life.

Over coffee, we discussed being bold and putting yourself out there, his love for collaboration, and what he believes his role to be as a theater artist is in our world today.

Since the time Adam was in diapers running out the tape on his *Jesus Christ Superstar* cassette, he has been in love with musical theater. He was the kid racing around creating stage pictures at the Seattle Children's Theater at the age of 10 with a bow tie and vest to boot, rather than wanting to be on the stage himself. Since directing at such a young age wasn't an option, Adam's parents presented him with the alternative of pursuing theater as a performer. For him, it was just being in the world, attending a performing arts high school like Seattle Academy of Arts and Sciences (SAAS), and going to Stagedoor Manor for nine summers that helped grow and foster his passion for theater.

Adam: I always knew that I didn't want to perform, that in the end I wanted to direct, but I took any opportunity I could to get into theater. When I was sixteen, a family friend named Gordon Greenberg was doing the show *Working* in Chicago. He knew I was interested in directing and he said, "Well if you want, Adam, if you can get out of high school, you can come assist me for six weeks." I brought it to my parents and they said if you can get SAAS to approve you to do this, then go ahead. SAAS thought it was a good learning opportunity and they let me move to Chicago and I assisted Gordon there. It was there for the first time that I really understood what directing was and what assistant directing was and was like, "Oh yeah, this *is* what I want to do."

Upon returning to Seattle, Adam would continue to seek out opportunities to assist and direct projects wherever he could. He was also able to do a casting internship at the 5th Avenue Theater as his senior project. Even though he knew casting wasn't what he wanted to ultimately pursue, he craved the experience of being in the room at a place like the 5th Avenue Theater and the opportunity to learn from those artists.

A: I wanted to have a better idea of the theater as a whole and see what it takes to put together a production. It's just about being in the room and being present and listening and gaining knowledge that way. I was pretty well versed in theater so I knew how it worked, but there was that professional setting that you don't really start to understand until you're in the room. I think I just wanted that experience and that *juiciness*.



After high school, Adam went on to attend the University of Michigan to study directing. During his time there, he continued to seek out opportunities for work which included assisting Gordon Greenberg on *Holiday Inn* at Goodspeed and associate directing *Elf* at Paper Mill Playhouse and the 5th Avenue Theater's new adaptation of *Paint Your Wagon*. He was putting in the work and getting his name out there so projects began coming to him, but Adam still emphasizes that the majority of his opportunities come from putting himself out there and contacting artists he wants to learn from and work with.

A: I think a big part of being a young director is making your own opportunities and reaching out and being bold. I think that that is the only reason that I've gotten where I am at this point. You know, there are so many hundreds of people who are such talented artists in this city [New York], in Seattle, in Chicago, in every single city there are a hundred people behind you who could do the job just as well as you. It's about saying "I deserve to be here and I want to be here. I want to learn from this, but I also want to contribute." To this day, the reason I get the majority of the jobs I get is sending e-mails and meeting directors and saying I really want to work with you, I want to learn from you. This past year, I was lucky enough to work on *Dear Evan Hansen* and that simply came because of a coffee I had with Michael Greif. It was from that that I became the assistant director of the off-broadway production. If there's someone that I really want to work with, I'm going to find a way to work with them and I'm going to find a way to at least e-mail them. There was this album I heard last year and I went "God, that's good music. That music would be good on stage." I searched the artist on Facebook and found out I had a mutual friend. I asked that friend for their email, I e-mailed the artist, and now we're writing a musical together. That wouldn't have happened if I didn't just take the five minutes to see if I actually could get in contact with that person.

"It's about being brave in your talents and your knowledge, but it's also about being humble and being willing to learn. It's going in the room everyday and observing and taking in as much as I can while also doing the jobs that I need to do, whether it's taking notes, helping stage management with a transition, or whatever it may be. It's about observing and learning so that when I am a director I'm the most prepared I can be."



Adam's most recent directing pursuit where he got to utilize the skills he has been learning in those rooms was a staged reading of the new musical *The Bishops*, which I had the opportunity to see as part of Black Coffee Productions Fresh Grind Festival. That project started just one week after he wrapped up his work on *Dear Evan Hansen*. Adam is a pro at spinning a hundred plates at once and somehow managing to keep them in perfect harmony with one another. Right now he's doing everything from assisting, to being an associate, to directing. With his well thought out calendar of projects, Adam also makes a point to never have a free moment and always to be working on projects in varying states of development.

A: I work best when I'm busy. I'm a much more motivated, happy, interested person when I wake up in the morning and have a million things to do, and because of that I try to fill my time the most I can. I moved to New York just over a year ago and I wasn't doing anything for a week and I was searching for a job and then *Dear Evan Hansen* came to be and I did that for about four months. Then I went to Seattle and served as the associate director on *Paint Your Wagon*. Then I came back and did the workshop of *Beatsville* and then we did *Dear Evan Hansen* on Broadway and all during that I was developing projects of my own. It's about strategically planning out when you start them so that they're at certain parts of the process when you have free gaps, so that every time I come back from a gig as an associate or an assistant I have a reading of *The Bishops* or I'm developing this new musical. *The Bishops* has had a reading and is going through rewrites, there's another one that is in the middle of being written, there's another one that we're still pitching to different producers. So they're all at different timelines, but I try to plan it out so that I'm always doing *something*. So I get back from *Beatsville*, I have about a month to do *The Bishops*, then I'm doing a play off-Broadway, then I have another little free moment when we're hopefully going to be doing a reading of one of the other projects, and then I go to Seattle. I try to plan out my life so I never have free time. I approach every day as if it's my last and I know that's a morbid way of thinking, but it helps me stay motivated because as soon as I get passive, my work goes down. I'm at a point in my life where I want to be busy 24 hours a day and be in meetings and meeting new and interesting people and creating new interesting work and that means waking up everyday and going for it.

What I respect and admire in Adam is that his ego is completely removed from any of the projects he takes on. He doesn't care where the work is or what his role is, he is there to do the work and collaborate to create the best possible piece of art.

A: There's no experience that I would turn down, whether it's working in the Broadway community and hearing about the way they create their work, to sitting with a couple of twenty year olds bouncing ideas for a new play. That's exciting, that's what gets me up every day. I couldn't imagine waking up and not having meetings and whether I'm the least important person in the room or the most important person in the room - I love being there. It matters to me that I'm in the room and I'm present and available to learning and growing. When I'm the most important, my job is to listen to the ideas of others and pick the best ideas. A director isn't good because of the ideas they have, a director is good because of the ideas around them. Hearing the designer saying something about the sound and going, "Oh that *is* good," and talking to the author because of it. It's not being prideful in your own ideas to not accept someone else's. When I'm the least important person in the room, it's about sitting back and listening and thinking about how I could use [the ideas] in my own piece or how I could make this present piece better. You know, collaboration is everything to me. I think that people who are too prideful in their own ideas - they limit their art. Why would I ever want to do that? Don't I want the best possible experience for the audience member? So because of that, I don't care if you're my intern, my lighting designer, my actor, my choreographer, if you have an idea and it's going to make it better, why would I not use it? And then I'm not going to stand here and say oh that's *my* idea. Go with it, be collaborative, be open, be present.



The passion and drive that Adam has for the work all stems from his love of storytelling and sharing the human experience in new and authentic ways. He doesn't want things to be clean and nice and wrapped in a bow - he wants to see the messiness, the secrets, the lies, and to explore the human condition.

A: I think we're so fascinating as humans. The decisions we make are fascinating to me. We are innately flawed as humans and it's those stories that I'm interested in telling. I'm interested in telling the stories of the ostracized, the flawed, the ugliness, the messiness, I'm always telling actors, "I want to see the messy," because that's what we are as humans. We are not perfect. We are not clean. We have secrets and those are the stories that spark me. I know how three-dimensional I am, I know all the shitty stuff that goes on in my life, I know all the secrets I have, and all the lies I tell. So I look around this coffee shop and I think, "how many lies are sitting in this coffee shop?"

This fascination of the human condition is only a springboard off of where Adam gets his inspiration for storytelling. He is constantly looking for stories in every place he goes, in everything he sees, in every piece of art or content he comes across.

A: I play this game with myself where every single time I take a plane ride I stop by Hudson News and I pick a book simply based on the cover. I read as much of the book as I can on the plane, and at the end of the plane ride I go, "Should this be a play or a musical?" and if the answer isn't already yes, then I put it down. I have so many books now that are filling my cabinets. I think my duty as a director and as a theater artist is constantly to be looking for stories. I've been like staring at this wall this entire time because as a piece of design, it fascinates me and it's been drawing my attention. I think, "How would that look onstage?" or, "What kind of world would that be in?" and to me I look at this and think "This belongs in a serial killer's apartment." I don't know why my brain goes here, but then I start thinking about serial killers as I'm walking down the street. You know, stories are all around us, it's about finding them and being open to them. It's also being open to what I haven't seen before that I've always wanted to see.

Storytelling is clearly at the root of what Adam is passionate about, but what made him choose musical theater as the medium to tell those stories versus straight plays?

A: I think the language of musical theater is so interesting because you're not just telling the story through the book, but you're using the music and movement and your voice to tell the story in a different way and to me it's a very visceral way and it's powerful. Theater can do many different things: it can shine a mirror on the reality we're living in, it can be an escape, but I find there's something about musical theater that blends the two in this really interesting way. I think the balance between allowing an audience to feel entertained while also learning about themselves is a tricky thing I think musical theater does so well because of its heightened reality.



If Adam could leave readers with one piece of advice, it would be this:

A: I got the best advice of my entire life when I was fifteen years old: Never say "no". Never say there's something you can't do. Someone asks you to write a song [and] you've never written a song before - write a song. We all have the ability to do incredible things as humans and we don't give ourselves enough credit, because we go, "Oh no, I don't do that." You have to be bold and you have to just do it. You fall on your face, you fall on your face. You're no good at it, you're a bad drawer, whatever it is, okay! At least you tried.



I know I am beyond excited to continue following Adam's journey and to see what projects and collaborations he's a part of next. Be sure to keep up with him on Instagram and Twitter @adamrquinn

see more at laurenkhalfayan.com

<https://www.thewtfyears.com/blog/2017/2/8/storytelling-and-embracing-the-mess-with-adam-quinn>