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Dressing the New World: Costume Design for an Unconventional Adaptation
of Jason Robert Brown's *Songs For A New World*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theater

by

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Utah State University
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Abstract

This thesis follows the process of designing the costumes for the University of Arkansas' production of the musical Songs For A New World by Jason Robert Brown. The following will detail the steps taken to conceptualize and realize the costume designs for the full process of the production. Included in this thesis is the analysis of source materials and other dramaturgical research, my research images and process sketches, final costume renderings, and production photographs. Overall, this document will record the design process and my evaluation thereof.

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Introduction

Songs For A New World is a song cycle written by Jason Robert Brown. The University of Arkansas produced two weeks of performances of Songs at the University Theater in the Spring of 2023. The production was directed by Morgan Hicks, and the design team consisted of the following: Morgan McInnis as scenic designer, Austin Bomkamp as lighting designer, Grason Unzelman as projections designer, and Karl Hermanson as properties designer. Undergraduate student Dana West served as my assistant costume designer. This design work was supervised by my mentor Professor Helene Siebrits, Head of Costume Design at the University of Arkansas. The costume build and coordination process was supervised by Valerie Lane as Costume Shop Manager. MFA Candidate Ripley DeCaluwe and undergraduate student Mercy Embree served as drapers for this production.

In this thesis, I have documented my complete design process. When I design a production, it is my goal to create a visual image that supports the story and the message of the text being produced. In her essay Visit to a Small Planet, Elinor Fuchs advises theatre makers to consider each production as taking place on its own planet, potentially with its own unique set of rules and values and visuals of its own. That approach is crucial to my personal design process. The practice of separating the world of the play from our world and examining it as its own entity allows me to craft every detail with intention that supports the goals of the story.

The design process of Songs For A New World began with close examination and analysis of the text, followed by a series of conversations with the director and my fellow designers. As I explored the material, I aggregated visual research from primary and secondary sources to inform my design decisions conceptually and visually. I used these research images, as well as multiple iterations of sketches, to communicate and collaborate with the creative team.

When final design decisions were made, I created full color renderings of each costume look in order to communicate my designs to the cast, the designers, and the costume shop. Over the following months, the costume pieces were pulled, shopped, draped, built, altered, and fit, until everything was finished. The show opened on April 14, 2023.

Chapter One: Prospectus

This chapter lays out all the preparatory work I did to properly understand the text of the play and the context from which it stems. Those efforts included investigation into the writer/composer and the historical context in which the play was originally written, as well as specific research and analysis on the lyrics of each song.

Dramaturgy

Textual Analysis. Unlike what one might expect of a traditional musical, Songs has no dialogue between musical numbers and no overarching narrative to connect the songs. Instead, a common theme of choice and change runs through the entire score. This necessitated a slightly unusual approach to my research for the production. Specificity is crucial to any design, and in this case, there was very little in the way of specific and concrete information to serve as a jumping off point. Therefore, my analysis began with combing through the lyrics for any details that might provide clarity. For example, the song *Just One Step* follows a woman pushed to the brink of her tolerance after her husband refuses to buy her a fur coat. The song also contains the line “Look, I think it’s Maury Povich!” Based on these two details, I can infer that the song takes place between 1986 and 1991. This is because the television host Maury Povich was not widely famous until 1986 (NBC Universal *Maury Povich*), and the popularity of wearing fur as a status symbol of wealth and luxury dropped off sharply in the 1990s (Lewis et al. *The rise and fall of*

the real fur industry in the US). I repeated this process with each song, noting the range of dates possible for each. For example, the song *Flagmaker, 1775*, contain a very specific and obvious date. Other numbers, such as the song *Christmas Lullaby*, contain no indicators of any specific time range. Appendix One contains a full breakdown of the songs, what details I gathered, and which dates or date ranges I assigned to the individual musical numbers.

About the Author. Jason Robert Brown, the composer and lyricist for Songs for A New World, was born in 1970 in New York City, where he grew up and has lived the majority of his life. His love for the city of New York is clearly apparent in his writing. Brown is also ethnically and culturally Jewish, and this aspect of his identity is deeply interwoven into Songs For A New World. Many of his characters use Yiddish slang words or phrases during particularly emotional moments. The song *On the Deck of a Spanish Sailing Ship, 1492*, in my understanding, is based on Spain's directive to exile all Jews in the year 1492. This topic is addressed further in Appendix One.

Brown studied at the Eastman School of Music in New York, and cites his exposure to the work of Stephen Sondheim during this critical developmental period as being his inspiration to pursue music for theater. Songs For A New World was Brown's first major major debut after working as a composer, conductor, and lyricist in New York for several years. He has continued to write many more musicals for Broadway and Off-Broadway including Parade, The Last Five Years, 13, Bridges of Madison County, and Mr. Saturday Night. Many of these productions have been heavily awarded by the Tony Awards and other distinguished institutions.

Current Events. The original off-Broadway production of Songs For A New World premiered in 1995. Brown and original director Daisy Prince compiled rejected or cut songs from Brown's other projects, which I infer were written between the beginning of his career in the very early

1990s and 1995 when the production finished development. This period contained many turning points that changed the course of history. Many cultural aspects that defined previous decades, like the Cold War or the AIDS epidemic, were coming to a close. Other events of the early 1990s, like the advent of the internet and the Space Shuttle program, pointed towards a future that would look very different. I can see how this cultural environment would inspire Brown to create art about moments of change that alter the course of one's life. He was living in what many consider to be the cultural center of America, and likely experienced these massive societal shifts very intensely.

Record of Relevant Productions. The play was first workshopped in Toronto, Canada before opening off-Broadway at the Workshop of the Players Art theater in 1995. The production ran for 2 ½ weeks of previews and 3 ½ weeks of official performances. Regional productions began in 1998 and have been especially popular in small regional and collegiate settings due to the minimal technical requirements of the traditional staging, which is similar in style to a cabaret or concert performance. Songs opened on the West End in 2001 and in France in 2013. The show was revived with an additional youth ensemble in New York at the Chernuchin Theater in 2008, and was also digitally produced in 2020. The production company Encores! produced a staged concert version in 2018. Both the original off-Broadway cast and the 2018 Encores! Version produced a cast album. During my design process, I found that I connected much better with the 2018 version. I believe this is due to society's ever changing taste in vocal qualities, as the 1998 version sounds dated to my ear.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This section will cover my design and decision making process, as well as the specific practices used to gather, assemble, and fit all the costume pieces used in the show. While my own design practices include careful consideration of practical constraints, there are inevitably adjustments that must be made to the initial designs as new information arises. This process was a highly collaborative one, and I believe that will be evident throughout this record of the production process.

Design Phase (Pre-production)

Initial Concepts

When we met as a creative team to talk about the production for the first time, our director Morgan Hicks referenced a letter from the popular advice column, Dear Sugar. This column is written under the pseudonym “Sugar,” which is a title passed between the exceptional literary figures who take on the mantle of answering readers’ pleas for advice.

The letter Hicks presented was called The Ghost Ship That Didn’t Carry Us and was written by bestselling author Cheryl Strayed. In the letter, the reader asks how to know what the right choice is in big life decisions when there is no clear correct answer. Strayed responds by asserting that, if no primal or divine impulse makes the right choice clear to you, you simply get to choose. You will probably never know if it was the “right” decision or not, because this one life we live is all we have. However, she urges us to acknowledge and honor our “sister lives,” all the lives we might have lived if we had made different choices at pivotal moments. She paints a beautiful metaphor of the life we might have lived as a ghost ship, sailing alongside our own vessel, following the path we might have followed.

Hicks presented this letter to the creative team and proposed this metaphor of the ghost ship as a central visual metaphor for our production. This choice especially complimented the second song in the cycle, *On the Deck of a Spanish Sailing Ship, 1492*. Specifically, this idea was presented mainly as a scenic element, but the image of a grand wooden sailing ship with its warm wood tones and creams was very evocative to me. I found that image to connect well with the theme of the journey, and I can imagine each character as being on this ghost ship as they contemplate the consequences of their choices.

In this first meeting, we also discussed what type of show we wanted to produce and how our production would differ from previous iterations. Already, we knew that we were working with a cast of twelve actors instead of the traditional four. Furthermore, the usual way of staging the show is very minimal, which is effective in communicating the material in many instances but is somewhat antithetical to the educational goals of the University of Arkansas and the artists involved in the project. We agreed that our production would take on a more theatrical tone than the previous staged concert versions. This would include highly designed and produced scenic, costume, light, and projection elements. Our production would also incorporate ensemble vocals and dance/movement in many of the songs.

As I began to work on the design in earnest, I listened to the cast recordings over and over. Hearing the same four voices sing all of the musical numbers, I recognized that having those familiar faces and voices return over and over was a crucial force in unifying the show and making it feel like all the pieces belong together. Our twelve person cast would not have the same effect. Therefore, I knew that a strong visual cue or element was necessary to unify these independent stories and voices. These numbers were selected for this song cycle for a reason, and

in order to provoke the audience to contemplate why that might be, I wanted to remind them that these songs are all a part of this new cohesive world.

Research

The a la carte nature of Songs For A New World's structure meant that the research phase of my design process looked a little different than it might have for a more traditional play. This initially threw me for a loop, and for some time I didn't know how to start my process. It was at this point that I began my dramaturgical research into the fine details of the lyrics, out of sheer need for some semblance of a starting point. I scraped the text for indicators of time and place. For some songs this gave me a fairly precise answer. For other musical numbers, I relied more on my initial impression of each individual song based on the lyrics and the musical stylings. I noticed a pattern beginning to form. My placements allowed for a large portion of the songs to take place at roughly 10-year intervals from 1930-2020. Once I noticed this pattern, I leaned into it, assigning some of the more time-ambiguous songs to the gaps in the timeline. This practice was initially experimental in nature, but over the course of the production's development, it became a crucial part of my interpretation.

For example, the song *She Cries* does not contain any specific details that would necessitate its placement in one year or another. I interpreted the narrative as a man experiencing some sort of resentment towards his own feelings of sympathy towards a woman he is romantically involved with and the power she has over him. The attitude expressed in the song evoked in me the image of the classic Americana picket fence misogyny. There is a sort of picture-perfect man who believes 'a good woman knows her place' that we see depicted in media and advertising especially from the economic boom that immediately followed the Second World War. Setting this song in the late 1940s allowed it to fit neatly between *The River* (1930s) and

Stars and the Moon (1950s). I also wanted to use some of the more flexible numbers to fill in the space between 1775 (*Flagmaker*) and *The River* (1930s). Therefore, I chose to place *I'm Not Afraid* and *Flying Home* in the 1830s and 1860s respectively in order to create a more evenly spaced timeline.

For each of these time placements, I gathered research images of clothing from the time periods, especially of the character archetype I envisioned. The images were mainly from primary sources such as photographs, paintings, patterns, and advertisements. Examples of my research collections can be found in Appendix Two. These collections were presented alongside my table of time placements at the second meeting of the full creative team.

The presentation of my historical-based concept was well received. There was a proposal put forth to change the order of the musical numbers to be in the chronological order I had selected in order to frame the show as a journey through history. This idea was soon discarded, presumably due to rights issues, but the theme of designing through history seemed to resonate with the group, and we decided to proceed with this idea.

Preliminary Designs

After settling on a concrete concept for my designs, I returned to the problem of promoting a unified visual throughout the production. The idea of spreading the songs across history was an excellent source of specificity and direction, but it also further separated the songs from each other. It was at this point that I began to entertain the idea of utilizing a highly limited color palette. Restricting the garments to only a few colors would create the effect of a matched set across many different time periods. However, when you restrict your color usage, the colors you do select become far more important. The shades and hues chosen need to complement all of the numbers and will inevitably bring with them the symbolism we as a society have assigned to

certain colors. I took care to consider several color options and the way they would reflect on the lyrical content, as well as how they would complement the colors of the nautical-themed scenic design.

The inspiration for the color palette I chose began with the beloved American musical Hamilton, which features scenic design by David Korins and costume design by Paul Tazewell. I was drawn to study the tactics used in Hamilton because the set of the Broadway and touring productions resembles a deconstructed ship in many ways, which is similar to our idea for Songs For A New World. In the opening number of Hamilton, the full ensemble is wearing simplified, sleek period costumes in shades of cream and tan. To me, this choice has the dual effect of creating a strong ensemble presence on stage, conveying a sense of potential for anything to happen. In that moment in Hamilton, we are examining the story of Hamilton's life from the outside while considering everything that did and didn't happen to him. The neutral tones bring all the different characters from different moments and places from Hamilton's story into one unified group. That effect is very powerful, and I knew that emulating it for our production might have a similar effect.

However, the issue with this method is its ability to retain audience attention. Hamilton only uses the all-neutrals stage picture for the opening number, and our production would be using it for a 90 minute performance. If I were an audience member at this show, I would find it difficult to contrast the varying numbers if I was watching all brown and beige outfits the whole time, not to mention it would be visually boring. At this point, I knew I was close to the right color combination, but the concept still needed more refining.

The answer to this question came out of practicality. Although many of the lyrics are quite unspecific, the song *Flagmaker, 1775* contains multiple iterations of the phrase "One more

star, one more stripe” in a very clear reference to the construction of the first American flag. Therefore, in at least this one moment, we have to have red, white, and blue on stage as we see what she is sewing. Continuing both those colors through the entire production would push American patriotism a little more than I felt the text called for, but including red on other significant costume and prop elements would pop the singers out of a sea of beige and create clear visual differences between the numbers. Red was the missing color that would make a neutral ensemble feel more alive. I proceeded to make rough sketches of my concepts for each song using this cream/brown/red palette. These sketches were created using the digital drawing software Procreate. An example of them can be found in Appendix Three. I presented these drawings at our next design meeting. The color palette was well received, and we made some small adjustments to the concept of specific songs to better suit the director’s vision.

It was at this juncture that we began to seriously discuss the ensemble cast for the full company numbers and how they would be costumed. The number of pieces that we would need to dress the entire ensemble in different looks for each full company number would not be manageable with the shop capabilities, time, and budget that we had. In this situation, the simpler the solution, the better. Fortunately, the current paradigm of all neutrals with a pop of color is easily shifted back out of focus by having the actors remove or replace their colorful element while not in their principal role. There were some actors who would need entirely separate pieces for their ensemble costume, such as Ashton Franquiz (*Stars and the Moon* and *Surabaya, Santa*). However, most of the cast only needed to remove elements or have minor substitutions in order to blend into the ensemble.

Final Designs

The final designs for this production were to be delivered and presented in the form of fully illustrated costume renderings. I chose to use a combination of digital and traditional techniques to render my designs. The sketch and linework versions of the drawings were done digitally in Procreate in order to speed up my workflow and allow me to make adjustments easily as I went along. Once the linework versions were completed and approved by director Morgan Hicks, I used a Xerox machine to print the linework onto 11"x14" watercolor paper. I then painted the figures and clothing with watercolors and used alcohol ink markers to deepen shadows and refine details. I also added lettering to each rendering to indicate the title of the song pictured, incorporating the text into the drawing in by following the lines created by the figures' poses.

Finally, I assembled a presentation consisting of each design rendering next to the actor information and some of the most influential reference images. I presented these final designs first to the director and creative team, and then later to the cast on the day of their first rehearsal.

Build Phase

Once the final design renderings were approved, I and the University of Arkansas costume shop set to work realizing the designs. I created a piece list, itemizing every garment that would be included in each costume. That list was then sorted based on whether I thought that the item could be pulled from university stock, purchased either in person or online, or would need to be built from scratch. The list was approved by our costume shop manager Valerie Lane, who then worked with me to assign the items we intended to build to the drapers working in the shop. We elected to build three pieces: a luxurious velvet cocoon coat for the song *Surabaya*, *Santa*, an 1840's inspired day dress for *I'm Not Afraid*, and a suede medieval jerkin for *On the*

Deck of a Spanish Sailing Ship, 1492. The cocoon coat was assigned to be built by Ripley DeCaluwe, a fellow graduate assistant. The 1840s dress was built by our costume shop manager Valerie Lane, and the jerkin was assigned to be built by senior undergraduate student Mercy Embree.

We began assembling the costumes by searching the University stock for pieces we might potentially use. My design assistant, Dana West, was particularly instrumental at this juncture. It was decided that the ensemble members' looks would be extracted from stock as much as possible. I assigned West to take the lead on these ensemble costumes as an opportunity for her to experience this aspect of design, as her work history has primarily been in built costumes. West pulled a large selection of pieces that were suitable for the color palette and the time period for us to 'shop' from during fittings rather than assign pieces ahead of time. I found this approach to be very convenient and useful. We also pulled specific items for principal numbers if something similar to the rendering could be found.

My next step was to source the fabrics for our builds and the items intended to be purchased. Options for fabric shopping in person were very limited, as there are very few retail stores that carry apparel fabrics in our area. The material for the suede jerkin was purchased locally, but the other textiles were sourced online. We first ordered several sample swatches of all the fabric to make sure we were choosing the correct weight, color, and texture for the design. Online purchasing was also necessary for niche items such as reproduction civil war uniforms, and for uncommon sizes, such as a size 17 pair of men's dress shoes.

As our purchases arrived, the costume shop manager and I scheduled actors for fittings. Due to the highly varied nature of the production's content, some actors needed only a single fitting with minimal alterations, while others required many visits to the costume shop for

mockups, first fabric fittings, or alteration fittings. My approach for a costume fitting is to prepare several acceptable options for each piece, and then fit them on the actor in descending order of my preference. These fittings allowed me to make informed design decisions based on how pieces actually looked rather than my idealized drawings. This also allowed the drapers in the shop to adjust their patterns throughout the process so that the garments could be perfectly tailored to the actor.

Chapter 3: Limitations

While I would describe my experience designing the costumes for Songs For A New World as largely positive, the process was not without its difficulties. Throughout the process, the costume shop encountered and adjusted for small issues of illness or material shortages, none of which caused significant delays. The biggest difficulty for me as a designer came just after the first day of technical rehearsals, when we saw all the actors in costume on stage together for the first time. Almost immediately, the director raised some concerns about the ensemble costumes with me. In our conversation, we discovered that there had been some miscommunication early on in the process about the ensemble looks. We had talked at length about the role of the ensemble in full company numbers and how we wanted to create a neutral look that wouldn't conflict with any of the periods we were portraying. To me, that meant to find a look that was at least partially accurate to as many of the periods as possible. However, the span of time we covered was just too far to be able to do that. My assistant Dana West and I had settled on a look based around button-down tops and slacks, as that was generally acceptable in some form for most of the 20th century. All of these looks seemed suitable when examining them on their own during our costume fittings. However, when we saw them on stage together, Hicks and I both noticed that this choice was creating a 'business casual' aesthetic that did not support the visual

and storytelling goals of the production. At this point, we revisited our earlier conversations about the ensemble to figure out where the disconnect originated. We discovered that Hicks' vision was of a more contemporary neutral, with strong elements of dance wear. This approach struck me as very useful, because it would allow audience members to see themselves reflected in the ensemble a little more. We also chose to incorporate a small change to dressing and blocking plans that allowed the audience to see the full cast in their ensemble costumes before any of the more specific songs began. This change clarified the storytelling by establishing a baseline of contemporary people, who then take on these different identities across history to tell these human stories.

This shift in fashion styling required a large amount of new costumes to be procured in an extremely short amount of time. Our university stock doesn't contain a lot of contemporary pieces, especially in such a limited color palette. Therefore, the best solution for the given time frame was to purchase new pieces for the new ensemble look. I visited as many local clothing stores as I could to shop for these new garments. Extra care was taken to track what I was buying and who I was buying it for, in order to prevent forgetting any needed pieces or purchasing more than was needed. I especially looked for knit and/or elasticized pieces because there wouldn't be time to do a lot of precise fitting and alterations of the new costumes. Thankfully, we were able to find all the new garments we were looking for. The cast was able to wear their new costumes the next day, and while a few pieces needed fit or design adjustments, the new look for the ensemble was ultimately very successful. I noticed that alongside the productive aesthetic adjustment, the cast seemed more comfortable and at ease in their new pieces. Although this last minute adjustment brought some serious challenges, I am pleased that I had the opportunity to make that change.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

As I reflect on my experience and my process designing Songs For A New World, the feeling that first comes to mind is gratitude. I was very fortunate to be able to work with a creative team that was united by a set of common goals and communicated positively with each other. The collaborative effort that we all put into this production was clearly evident in the performances.

One notable experience that came from this process was the nature of my role in the larger creative decision making. In the early stages of the process, I personally struggled to connect with the material, and the research I conducted was initially for my own benefit. However, I was very pleased that my explorations resonated with the rest of the designers and the director. This really allowed me to feel like a valued collaborator and that my artistic interpretations were being integrated into the production as a whole. In the future, I would be especially interested in opportunities that afford a similar dynamic in which my input can inform the overall concept of a production.

Throughout this process, there has been a thought at the back of my mind about the production concept as a whole. I am very proud and deeply satisfied with the show that we produced. However, a core aspect of my creative approach is doing what is necessary to serve the script and tell the story that the artists want to tell. I feel that we as a team worked very hard to design and execute a beautiful production that transformed the songs into something new and big. On the other hand, I am unsure that our approach was as true to the spirit of the material as it could have been. We chose to depart from the original off-Broadway setup by expanding the cast significantly, and my observation throughout the process was that many of the design decisions we made were motivated by a need to fix the problems that were created by the expansion. That

decision to expand the cast was motivated by artistic choice, but also by departmental needs regarding casting and project scale. I also acknowledge that I approached the scale and style of the costume design with awareness that this would be my thesis show, and so there was external motivation there to produce something on a grander scale. In retrospect, I do feel that this departure took away from some of the themes that we were trying to promote in this production. The idea of the different lives one might have lived is already well represented by having a small cast sing all the various musical numbers. I think that we were fighting ourselves to achieve that same goal with a larger group of people. In some ways, I was thinking about the ghost ship version of our production, and what it might have looked like in another life if different decisions had been made. I'm grateful that we made the choice we did, but I will always be aware of how those decisions shaped the entire future of the production.

In the end, I do feel that our production was able to communicate the message that we set out to convey at the beginning of the process. Designing this show through the successes and the challenges has opened my mind to new ways to do less with more, as well as knowing when less is better than more. I feel that my experience with Songs For A New World was a moment of change for me, and I look forward to incorporating the things I've gained from this process into my future artistic practices.

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Appendix 1: Song Analysis

A New World

It's about one moment/ The moment before it all becomes clear

And in that one moment/ You start to believe there's nothing to fear

In the first verse of the first song, Brown sets up the theme for the entire cycle. The lyrics of this number are all ruminations on this same theme, the importance of the single moment and how one might feel about it. This song does not contain a narrative. I believe the purpose of this song is to put the idea of the moment into the audience's minds before they get into the musical collection. Instead of wondering what all these disconnected songs have in common, the show becomes a challenge for audience members to identify the moment within each song. *A New World* exists as a framing outside of time because it communicates directly with audience members.

On the Deck of a Spanish Sailing Ship, 1492

*So I'm begging you, Lord/ You gotta stop, take a look at your children who believe in this
promised land/ Have mercy, Lord, stop their suffering and their woe*

In discussion with my peers, I discovered that this song is commonly believed to be about the voyage of Columbus, the Spanish explorer who famously “discovered” the New World in 1492. This interpretation is initially understandable—all the ingredients are there. However, an analysis of the lyrics makes that interpretation highly implausible, in my opinion. The singers of *Spanish Sailing Ship* are begging God for mercy, for respite, for a place they can be safe from suffering. Columbus was on a journey sponsored by the Royal family of Spain, and his voyage was to seek advantageous trade routes. That interpretation conflicts with the lyrics, which contain desperate pleas for suffering to end and prayers for food to be answered.

My belief is in the alternate interpretation that the song is about the Jewish people being expelled from Spain in 1492. In that same year that Columbus sailed, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain passed a resolution to remove all Jews from their borders. The Jewish people, who have generations of history being persecuted and exiled, were forced to take to boats and find somewhere new to live. The lyrics of the song support this interpretation in that they are full of religious references and pleas to God, except that they always say Lord and not God, which is in line with the principle of Judaism to not use the Lord’s name directly. There are many references to the concept of the Promised Land, which is a central concept of Judaism. Knowing this, and knowing that Jason Robert Brown is Jewish, leads me to believe that this is the historical event that inspired this song.

Just One Step

*You don't want to buy me the fur?/ Well, that's just fine Murray
Ma, I think it's Maury Povich*

The woman singing in *Just One Step* is a disenchanted wife who has been pushed to the edge of her patience and is threatening to jump off of the edge of their apartment building in order to win the presumed fight with her husband. She puts herself in a dangerous position, but her actual willingness to step off the edge of the 52nd floor penthouse balcony seems to be lacking. She fakes falling off the edge several times during the song, which presumably does not have the desired effect, as the song continues after these attempts.

My historical analysis of this number is based on two crucial details. First, we know that this fight stems from the fact that she wants her husband to buy her a fur coat, but he is refusing to do so. For a good portion of the 20th century, fur was a symbol of wealth and luxury, and often was given to wives as a gift by their husbands. However, according to an article by *Business Insider*, production of fur began falling rapidly in the late 1980s-1990s after animal rights organizations began to push back against the industry. I think it is safe to assume that this woman is asking for a fur coat while they are still popular and not viewed as cruel, so I rule out anything after the year 1991. The second detail is her reference to Maury Povich, a celebrated TV Show host whose first syndicated television show began airing in 1988. That left me with a 3 year window, and I chose 1988 in order to fit better into our decades-based model. Due to the presence of 52 story apartment buildings and Jason Robert Brown's upbringing, I believe the song takes place in New York City.

I'm Not Afraid

The lyrics of *I'm Not Afraid* don't allude to any specific time or place, but instead dwell on the specifics of the singer's inner life and her relationship with her loved ones. We can glean that she has a mother and a father, two loved ones named Jennie and Katie, and a romantic interest named David. My impression is that Jennie and Katie are her younger sisters, but they

could also be her friends or her children. The song follows this woman as she reassures both the audience and herself that she doesn't have any fears that hold her back. We see her resolve hesitate a few times, but she clings to it and manages to finish singing the song in quiet certainty.

Because I know that every song in this cycle is about a moment of decision, and the song sets up how the woman is different from all the people in her life, I interpret the song as being the moment that the woman resolves to leave her old life for a new adventure. The concept of a woman leaving her family for her own interests has become less of a taboo as time goes on, and I wanted the emotional stakes of this song to feel very high. That is why I selected it as one of the songs to place in the 1800s, specifically a rough 1840s window. In that context, the character reminded me very much of Jo from Little Women, so I took design inspiration from that character.

The River

My mama said, "Son, if you stay on this path,

You'll find a river full of money where the rich fish flow"

The central metaphor of *The River* is that the flow of wealth and economic success is like a river, and if you can just find it, you will have everything you desire. The singers of the song are surprised, then, when the prosperity they have been promised escapes them. They correctly identify that it's not for lack of effort or because things were destined to be this way, but that the river actively excludes them. They specifically say, "the river won't" as well as "the river don't", which indicates that they know this is the result of other people's choices instead of pure fate. Still, the attitude of the song is upbeat and surprisingly fun. This energy, along with their

mentions of running and not settling down, fits nicely with the somewhat fictional archetype of the laid back “hobos” of the 1930s during the Great Depression.

Stars and the Moon

This song, which is one of the most commonly performed tracks from this musical, follows a woman as she looks back on the romantic interests of her life and the choices that led her to regret the direction her life had taken. She opted for comfort and luxury over adventure and deep personal connection because she thought she knew what she wanted. It’s only after she has had a chance to live this dream life that she understands what the other men she encountered really had to offer.

I will admit that a large portion of my interpretation and decision making was aesthetically motivated for this song. The phrase ‘stars and the moon’ evokes nighttime, which makes sense for a regretful and introspective song like this. Therefore I knew I was going to dress this singer in some sort of sleepwear, and it had to be expensive and glamorous sleepwear to fit in with her chosen lifestyle. I immediately thought of the flowing robes and dressing gowns worn by various starlets in Golden Age 1950’s films. I elected to set the song in the 50s to tap into that feeling of glamour and luxury.

She Cries

Structurally, this song differentiates itself from the others by speaking directly to the audience. The singer is a man who resents his inability to resist a woman in his life, especially when she cries. Something about the tone of the song leads me to believe that this man’s account of events is not likely to be entirely objective. The way he describes it, the woman is intentionally manipulating him with her tears to get what she wants. However, I don’t know that I trust this retelling. To me, he comes off as having an overtly sexist attitude in a way that hasn’t

been okay, at least publicly, in a very long time. It calls to mind old media and advertising that describes women as some type of incomprehensible creature that is beyond male understanding, rather than a fellow human being. I began to describe this man as ‘the old-timey misogynist,’ and that interpretation was quite well received by our creative team. *She Cries* was chosen for the 1940s in reminiscence of the cartoonishly sexist advertisements of the time.

Steam Train

Watch me as I sign up a deal/With Nike and Adidas

He's better than Magic Johnson

There are several specific references within the lyrics of *Steam Train* that gave me a good starting point for dates. Athletic wear brands Nike and Adidas are mentioned, which were both popular brands during the expensive sneakers trend of the 1990s. This is backed up further by a line of ensemble dialogue comparing the singer to Magic Johnson, who played in the NBA in the 80s and 90s. Musically, this song has a sort of R&B effect that reminded me of the distinct style of loud and colorful music videos that I associate with the 90s. The protagonist of this number is a young black man from New York, who proudly compares his inevitable rise to success with the unstoppable force of an incoming train. This optimism and confidence is starkly contrasted with several spoken monologues detailing the singer’s traumatic life experiences. These factors work together to create a picture of a young man who may seem carefree and overconfident, but is actually deeply intentional and determined in his actions.

The World Was Dancing

And while the Pirates beat the Orioles/ We fell in love and danced the night away

Initially, this song was difficult for me to place. I noticed the line about the Pirates beating the Orioles, but I didn’t think that would be sufficient detail to analyze until I realized

that the line that references the game also mentions the characters are at a party. It seems much more likely that a party would be thrown for an especially significant game, so I decided to check if the Pirates and the Orioles had ever played each other in the World Series. It turns out that they have, twice: Once in 1971 and once in 1979. I decided to move forward as if they were referencing the 1971 game, so as to set the song firmly withing the 1970s. In context, the party in question happened approximately 6 months to a year before the actual events of the song take place. The female singer of this duet sweetly and simply anticipates her wedding on the next day. The man, however, launches into a rambling story of his family history and his college life. He eventually reveals that he is about to leave his fiancée without any notice or explanation.

Surabaya Santa

This song has the distinction of being both the only song based on a known fictional character, and being the only parody song in the production. On my first listen through of the song cycle, this song felt so unusual to me that I knew there had to be more going on underneath the surface. I began researching the song and soon learned that it was a parody of another musical theater song called *Surabaya, Johnny*. *Surabaya Johnny* is the only popular song from a long-forgotten musical called Happy End, which was written in 1929 by successful German playwright Bertolt Brecht. While many of Brecht's plays are considered classic works of theater, the same cannot be said of Happy End. It ran for only seven days at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin before closing and was seen as a massive commercial and critical failure. However, *Surabaya Johnny* survived long enough to be heard by Jason Robert Brown, who parodied it from the perspective of Mrs. Claus for this show. In homage to the source material, I chose to set *Surabaya Santa* in the late 1920s.

Christmas Lullaby

The second of the Christmas-themed songs in this show comes immediately after the first, but with a strikingly different tone. The pregnant singer of *Christmas Lullaby* finds herself helpless and powerless when faced with the weight of the task ahead of her. She draws on the story of Mary, the mother of Christ, to give her strength and to turn this situation into one of honor and peace instead of fear. The song intentionally never makes any mention of the father of the future child, putting all the focus on how isolated the mother feels. The story of the song connects two times in history-the birth of Christ about 2000 years ago, and the time the mother lives in. I decided to place her in the 2010s, a contemporary time. This choice was made both to call attention to the still desperate plight of impoverished and single mothers in the world today, and to span as long of a time gap as possible.

King of the World

The references in *King of the World* are all pulling from the distant past, talking in somewhat vague terms about the singer's ancestors and culture. We know that he was once a proud member of a powerful culture who has been brought down and is now in some sort of captivity. One of my initial interpretations was that the song depicts an enslaved person in the hold of a slave ship. However, I decided not to go with this more literal interpretation. I wasn't comfortable depicting slavery unless it was very necessary, and unless I had the time and capacity to do high-level research on the topic. Instead, I chose to bring it forward to another time that people were connecting with their African ancestors in order to gain empowerment and liberation-the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This interpretation implies that the singer has been imprisoned due to participating in this movement.

I'd Give It All For You

This duet is one of those rare love stories that is not about a romance that magically works out perfectly the first time. Instead, it features a couple who previously parted ways, went on to have their own unique experiences, and then independently decided that they wanted a life with each other. To me this is so much more romantic because of its portrayal of two individuals with their own full lives. Their lyrics don't come with a lot of time specificity, but they do insinuate a long and storied past between the characters. I chose to set this song totally contemporary. This decision was made partly to impart the message that love is always changing and evolving at every moment. It was also partly made because I was inspired by the fact that the cast members singing this song, Kailan Wiedner and Maggie Smith, are engaged in real life. I wanted to make their love story a part of this one, as well.

Flagmaker, 1775

One more star, one more stripe/ Join the blue, the white and red

Flagmaker, 1775 has the distinction of being the only song that references a specific, real person. The song's title gives us the year, and the lyrics specify that the flag she is sewing has stars and stripes. We, the audience, are meant to read this as Betsy Ross, the woman renowned for sewing the first American flag. In the song, she sews as she is kept up late at night with the fear that a child of hers who fights in the war might never come home. In my research for this show, however, I learned that not only is that not the actual story of Betsy Ross, but we also have no actual proof at all that it was her who designed the first flag. The story of the first American flag being designed by her is first told in a book by her grandson long after her death, and there are no other known accounts of the flag's inception. Despite all this, I think that the story of Betsy Ross is almost more of an American folk legend than it is a historical event, and that opens

the door to much more speculation about her life. I like this version of the story because it feels so personal, and it brings the plight and contributions of women to the forefront.

Flying Home

Death is impending, or maybe has already happened, for the singer of *Flying Home*. He sings hopefully about his destination while lingering just a little longer on earth, and is eventually joined by a chorus of other voices who turn the tone of the song from melancholy to joyful. When I first listened to this song, I could have sworn there were specific references to the dying man being a soldier, but when I went hunting for references there were none to be found. Still, my impression of the character as a fallen soldier remained, and I chose to make him a victim of specifically the civil war. I wanted to be clear and confident that he, as a Union soldier, had died for a good cause. Placing the date in the 1860s also helped to bridge that gap in time between *Flagmaker, 1776* and the more contemporary songs.

Hear My Song

Hear My Song is the finale of the production. It blends musically with *Flying Home* as we transition into it, as well as calling back musical themes from the *A New World*. This song is the second half of the framing that is set up in *A New World*. The song also exists outside of time, speaking directly to the audience instead of telling a story. This time however, instead of being a blank slate, we are looking back at the “one moment” in reflection. Rather than seeing the ensemble in their background neutrals, we chose to have the actors return in their principal costumes. Thus, where *A New World* is placed ‘nowhere’ in time, *Hear My Song* becomes ‘everywhere’ in time. Everything we have seen thus far comes together into one picture, and it feels nostalgic and climactic all at once.

Appendix 2: Research Collages

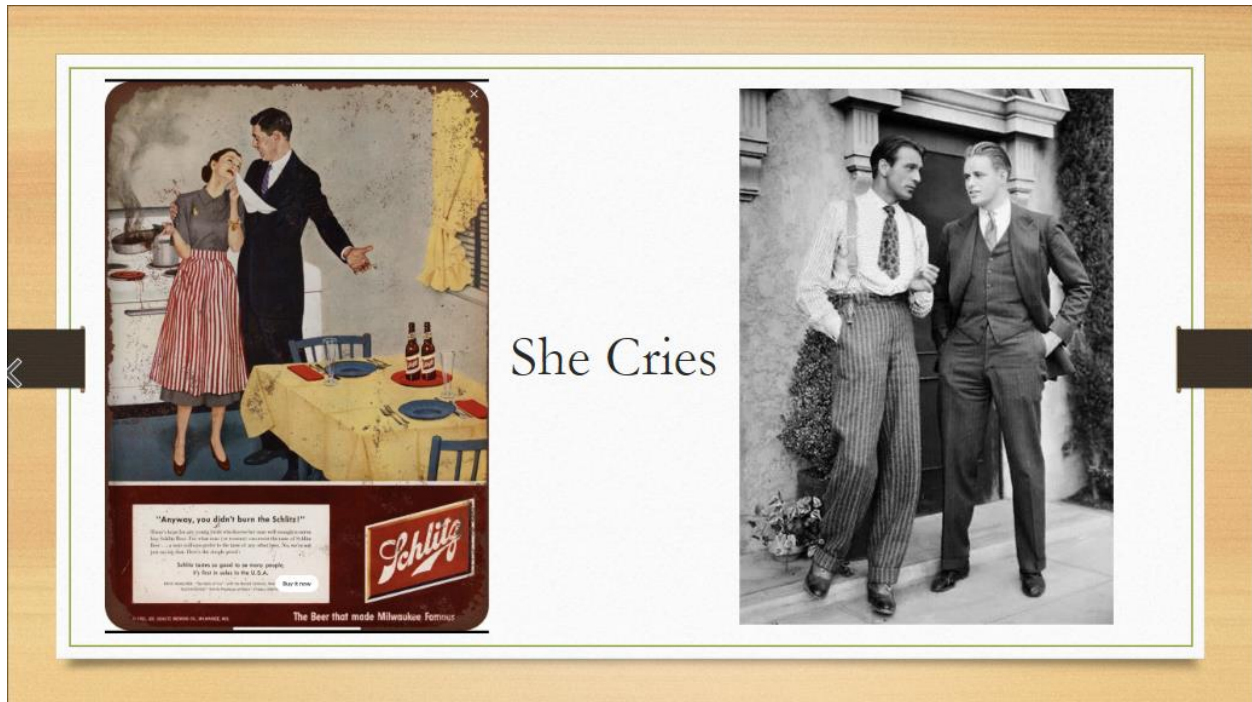


Figure 1. Two of the original research photos for the song *She Cries* from the first round of design presentations for Songs For A New World. Collage created by the author.

Image sources:

Ferris, Jean Leon Gerome. (circa 1880). Betsy Ross 1777 [Painting]. Private Collection. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Betsy_Ross_1777_cph.3g09905.jpg/

Mosler, Henry. (1907) The Birth of the Flag [Painting]. The Museum of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, United States. <https://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/art/exhibitions/exhibition-archive/2022/henry-mosler/henry-mosler-audio-exhibition/study-for-the-birth-of-the-flag/>



Figure 2. Two of the original research photos for the song *Flagmaker 1775* from the first round of design presentations for Songs For A New World. Collage created by the author.

Image sources:

“18 Interesting Vintage Photos That Show Men's Street Fashions in the 1930s.” *18 Interesting Vintage Photos That Show Men's Street Fashions in the 1930s* ~, 18 Feb. 2016, <https://www.vintag.es/2016/02/interesting-vintage-photos-of-street.html>.

Jacobs, Harrison. “26 Sexist Ads of the 'Mad Men' Era That Companies Wish We'd Forget.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 8 May 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/26-sexist-ads-of-the-mad-men-era-2014-5>.

Appendix 3: Preliminary Sketches



Figure 3. All the initial costume sketches with flat colors arrayed together to suggest the color palette. Drawn digitally using Procreate by the author.

Appendix 4: Final Renderings

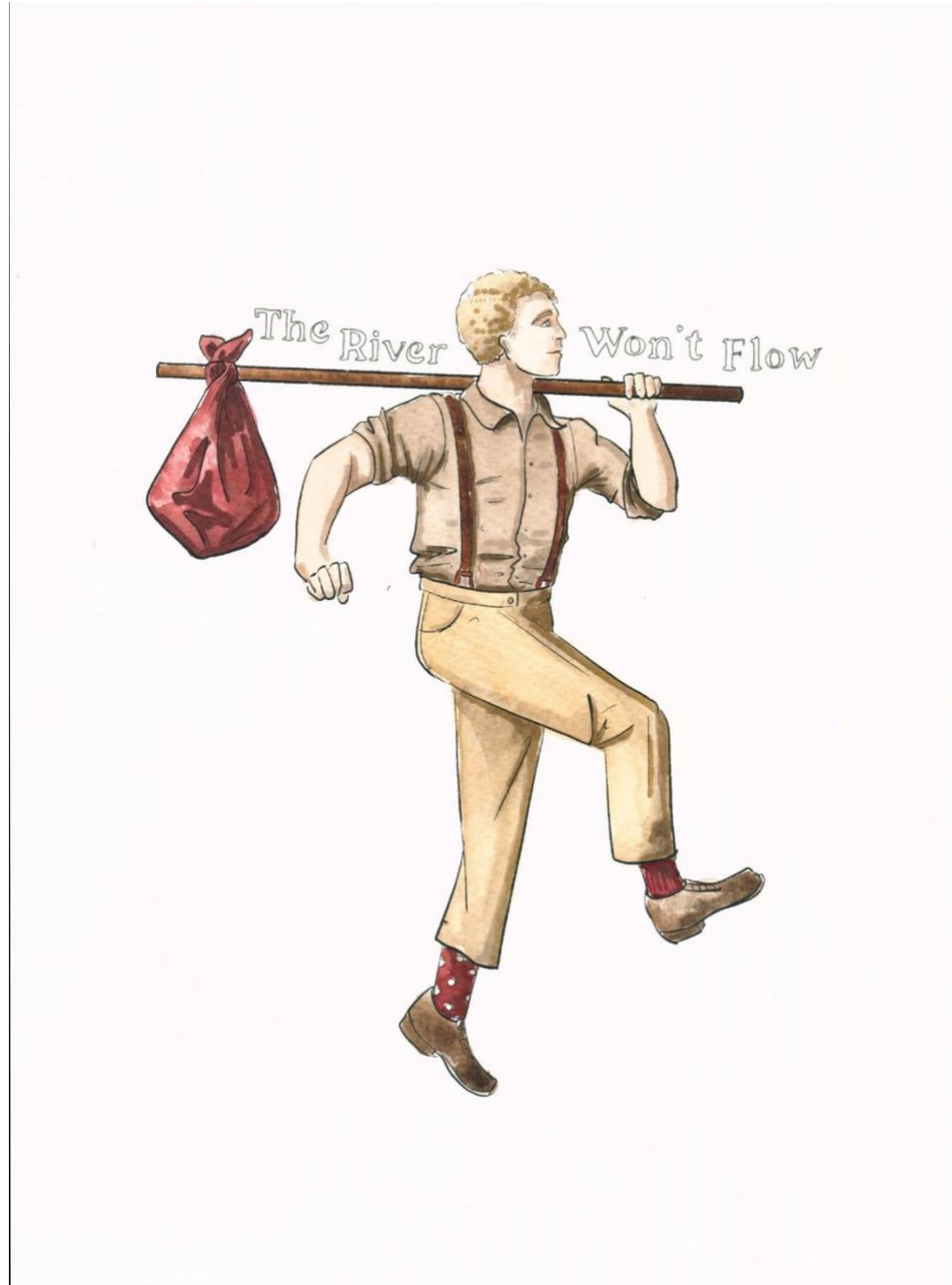


Figure 5. Costume Rendering by the author for actor Reece Edwards in his part in the song *The River Won't Flow*. Linework done digitally via Procreate, colors rendered with watercolor and alcohol ink marker.



Figure 6. Costume Rendering by the author for actress Maggie Smith in her part in the song *I'm Not Afraid*. Linework done digitally via Procreate, colors rendered with watercolor and alcohol ink marker.

Appendix 5: Working Drawing



Figure 7. Working drawing for a dress built for actress Maggie Smith for the song *I'm Not Afraid*. Provided to costume shop manager Valerie Lane by the author in order to drape/draft the garment

Appendix 6: Costume Plot

	The New World	Spanish Sailing Ship	Just One Step	I'm Not Afraid	The River	Transition 1	Stars and the Moon	She Cries	Steam Train
Alex Horn		Vest, boots, belt			Scarf, hat, vest, patches				
Alex Ahuja					coat, hat, pants, boots				overalls, hat, shoes
Trey Smith		Hat, belt, boots							Tank top, shorts, hat
Kailan Clay									
Reese Edwards					Suspenders, bindle				
Ryan Russell								Coat, tie, scarf	
Eden Wilson									
Maggie Smith				Scarf, vest, boots					
Belle Babin			80s Dress						
Ashton Franquiz							Robe, slippers, necklace		
Brianna Chapman									
Landry Miller									

The World Was Dancing	Surabaya Santa	Christmas Lullaby	King of the World	Give It All	Transition 2	Flagmaker	Flying Home	Transition 3	Hear My Song
					SSS				SSS
									The River
			BD shirt, blazer						King
Sweater, coat, glasses				Red shirt, tie			Bloody shirt		Give It All
									Dancing
						*Period dress			She Cries
				Cardigan					Flagmaker
									Not Afraid
	Coat, turban								Just One Step
dress, boots, bandana									Ensemble
		*Hospital gown, coat, scarf							Dancing
									Christmas

Figure 8. Table for tracking actor entrances and exits, including necessary clothing changes. The pale colored boxes indicate that the actor is present as an ensemble member, whereas the saturate orange indicates that the actor is present in a featured role.

Appendix 7: Check In Sheets

[illegible]

Figure 9. Example of a document provided to wardrobe crew members to track costume pieces and ensure that all pieces are present and accounted for at the beginning and end of each performance or rehearsal.

Appendix 8: Mirror Sheets

Belle Babin

Just One Step

Look 1 (*Ensemble*)

Wardrobe

- Tan crop top
- Brown pants
- White Sneakers

Look 2 (*Just One Step*)

Wardrobe

- Chanel tweed dress
- Nylons
- Nude pumps
- Bow blouse

Hair/Makeup/Accessories

- Gold earrings
- Gold bangles
- Engagement ring



Songs For A New World — Designs by Callie Lythgoe

Figure 10. Example of a document provided to cast members to track which costumes are worn during which musical numbers, as well as any particular dressing methods they may need to remember.

Belle Babin

Hair Notes

- Volume
- Curls/waves
- Big swoops away from the face if you can

Makeup Notes

- Basic corrective plus eyeliner, mascara, red lip



Figure 11. Example of a document provided to cast members with specific hairstyles or makeup looks as part of their costume, in order to provide references and notes for them to work from.

Appendix 9: Production Photos



Figure 12. Photograph of actor Kailan Weidner singing the final lines of *Flying Home*, surrounded by members of the ensemble in their principal costumes. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 13. Photograph of actor Reece Edwards singing the *The River Won't Flow*. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 14. Photograph of actors Brianna Chapman and Reece Edwards singing *The World Was Dancing*, surrounded by members of the ensemble. Photo taken by the author.