

Confused in love

Sondheim's sophistication influenced Erin Kamler

BY TERRI ROBERTS

At age 10 old, most girls are confiding their observations, hopes, dreams and despairs in pocket diaries locked tight with tiny gold keys. But not Erin Kamler. The fair-haired girl from Ann Arbor, Mich., whose parents divorced two years earlier, favored a far more theatrical form of writing and self-expression.

By age 10, Kamler was not only penning musicals, but also establishing herself locally as a performer and producer. Those horizons broadened as a teenager when she lived in Thailand for a time as a foreign exchange student. By the time she was 18 and had entered college, three of her plays had been named as finalists in the prestigious Young Playwrights Festival (YPF), founded in 1981 by Stephen Sondheim to foster the writing talents of children 18 years and younger. *Children of the Heavens*, about a group of troubled teenagers, was written when Kamler was just 13; *Acocado Pie*, a comedy about four women in the Southwest dealing with divorce (a recurring theme in her work), was written at age 14; *This Side of the Moon*, about the culture clash between a modern Thai-American girl and her more traditional mother, was written at age 18 upon her return from Thailand and based on her experiences there.

In 1994, her YPF script *This Side of the Moon* was presented at the Public around the same time *Passion* opened on Broadway. In a recent telephone interview, Kamler's voice squeaked with excitement as she remembered the thrill of meeting Sondheim when festival producers took the young playwrights to see *Passion*.

"I remember sitting, literally at his feet," Kamler says, "and gazing up at him as he gave this wonderful lecture about writing what you know, and just keep going and we are the future of theatre ... things like that. It was pretty cool!"

In an open letter on the Young Playwrights website, Sondheim describes how and why the festival was conceived, and his pleasure at its success. "We can take heart in the fact that there are hundreds of young writers around who have not been totally persuaded that television and sitcoms and formless movies and their innumerable (though often numbered) spin-offs represent the state of the narrative art," he writes. And, indeed, Kamler finds herself in good company. Some of the competition's youthful discoveries include writers who have grown into familiar names in the theatre world. They include Rebecca Gilman (*Spinning Into Butter*; *Blue Surge*; *Boy Gets Girl*), Kenneth Lonergan (*This Is Our Youth*; *The Waverly Gallery*; *Lobby Hero*) and Evan Smith (*The Uneasy Chair*; *The Secession Disputation*; *Psych*).

"The festival only allowed you to submit straight plays, otherwise, I surely would've

submitted my musicals," Kamler explains. "I had started working in musical theatre as an actor and singer when I was a really little kid, like 9. And then I started writing musicals around age 10. I got together with a friend and started a production company, and we actually produced the shows. So, from the time I was 10 through the end of high school, we produced about 15 musicals. This is what I did throughout my childhood!"

She continues, "I think my inspiration and confidence to write came from having the support of my community in Ann Arbor — a lot of really artistic people and a lot of nourishment for children to express themselves. I benefited from that environment. My parents were very supportive and nurturing, despite their difficult divorce. They put themselves and me through a lot of pain, but then turned around and later became really good friends. They were great."

Today, at age 34, Kamler the artist and Kamler the person have both been profoundly shaped by her experience. After graduating from Sarah Lawrence College, she moved to Los Angeles, where she is pursuing her master's degree in international public diplomacy at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication/School of International Relations, with a focus on cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. She has worked in public and private schools in Los Angeles as a vocal instructor and performed nationally and internationally with her albums *Mantra Girl: Truth* (2002) and *Mantra Girl: Trinity* (2005) as well as on Kundalini yoga instructional DVDs.

All of that is balanced with her love of writing and theatre. Each of her three YPF entries received professionally produced staged readings at the Public Theater or Playwrights Horizons in New York. In 1994 she won the University of Michigan's Hopwood Award for playwriting. Her musical *Rainbow 69* is currently in development at New Dramatists, where it won the 2008 Fred-

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Erin Kamler

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erick Loewe Award. Another musical, *The Jets of Calabazas*, is in development as well.

But perhaps most thrilling is what's happened with her experientially based, lemons-into-lemonade show, *Divorce! The Musical*. Embracing the old adage that Sondheim expressed in that post-*Passion* meeting years earlier — "Write what you know" — Kamler examined the grief and pain of her own two divorces (2001 and 2007), found the humor and universality in those experiences and wrote a scintillating musical comedy that has left audiences laughing in recognition and revelation as well as sending their exes and divorce lawyers to see the show.

Divorce! premiered on Valentine's Day 2009 at the Hudson Theatre in Los Angeles and was an instant hit. It received a Critic's Choice in the *Los Angeles Times*, Critic's Pick in *Back Stage*, GO! in *LA Weekly*, and was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered* and *Entertainment Tonight*. In May, two special performances — one with a gay couple, one with a lesbian couple — were held to benefit the Courage Campaign's support of equal rights for same-sex marriage. In late May 2009, *Divorce!* was still playing, a rare feat for a small show in Los Angeles — and, considering the current economic climate, a rather miraculous one. Moreover, public demand has forced limited extensions finally to be upgraded to an open-ended run. Plans are in the works for an off-Broadway production.

It's not surprising to learn that Sondheim's work influenced Kamler's, even before she really knew his name. "As a young child, I didn't really know who he was," she admits, "but *West Side Story* had a very fundamental influence on my work early on."

It is surprising to learn which of his shows inspired her in the writing of *Divorce!* Not *Company* with its reflections on the single life vs. marriage. And not *Passion* with its laser-focused look at longing and love. Instead, it was Sondheim's lightest, frothiest romantic confection.

"*A Little Night Music* is one of my favorite shows, and I listened to it in the car literally everyday while I was working on *Divorce!*" Kamler recalls. "It shaped my image of what my show could be. It's hard to describe, but I kind of get into the 'soul' of some musicals. Certain shows start to feed you and give you strength during the times when it's really hard to keep writing because you don't know where you're going. I tried to viscerally draw on the emotional content of the songs from *Night Music* and the style and tone ... that is, if you can imagine drawing strength from a tone! I know that's an abstraction, but that's really what happened."

Beyond the music of *A Little Night Music*, of course, are all those confused-in-love characters, searching for the right couplings: haughty Charlotte, dragonish Count Carl-Magnus, morose Henrik, innocent Anne, lonely Fredrik and independent Desirée.

Even the exploits of the libidinous Petra

sparked a creative flame for Kamler. "There was one moment when it became clear that I needed to write a potent solo. Ironically, though, the solo has since been cut from the show. I listened to 'The Miller's Son' and I thought, 'I need to write my version of that. It's that kind of strength that I need in my song.'"

She admires Sondheim's sophistication, suggesting that it "inspires me to go further and deeper and be smarter in my writing. It's the way he articulates characters and their real complexities. His sensitivity to characters and their emotional journeys is very special and very nuanced, and I think this sensitivity is something that many musical theatre writers fail to explore successfully. *Divorce!* is a show that demands that we take a hard look at ourselves, with all of our darknesses and complexities and humor and pathos. It helped to dip into the *Night Music* characters, with their contradictions and regrets and losses — all the nuances of that show. I am constantly inspired by the sophistication of Sondheim's eye."

Asked if not even *Company* held any sway, she answers, "I hadn't started studying *Company* until after I had written most of *Divorce!* I didn't go there until I had a draft of the show. I really enjoyed it, but it wasn't a direct influence in the way that *A Little Night Music* was. I think there's something more celebratory about that show, that celebrates the genre, and I think as a writer you sometimes need a boost to give you the will to write. *Divorce!* was a hard show to write. The first draft went really fast; I wrote it in a couple of months. But it was a tough show, and I was going through a tough time. I had just signed the papers and finished my own divorce when I sat down to write because I didn't know what else to do with myself. I needed a kind of celebration, and *Night Music* is so quintessentially everything I love about musical theatre. I just really drew on that."

It's been two decades since Kamler followed the advice of her middle-school drama teacher and entered a playwriting competition in New York that she had never heard of and knew nothing about. The results of that first submission and the two that followed have brought Kamler important relationships that continue to this day and helped to set a creative path she still follows.

"I feel incredibly fortunate for having had that opportunity and those experiences with the Young Playwrights Festival and the amazing people I met there who nurtured me and nourished my voice at such a young age," she says candidly. "I don't think I would've continued had I not had that support early on." [SR]

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For tickets and more information on *Divorce! The Musical*, visit www.divorcemusical.com. For more information about Erin Kamler and her projects, go to www.erinkamler.net.