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A Joyride to Beatsville

For GLENN SLATER and WENDY LEIGH WILF, the balancing act begins with being husband-and-wife

By Terry Berliner



In 2002, the choreographer Jen Copaken whispered to me, "You have to meet Glenn Slater and his wife, Wendy Leigh Wilf." Copaken had gone to Harvard with Slater, a native New Yorker, who was at the time just beginning to work as lyricist with composer Alan Menken on *The Little Mermaid* for Broadway. With that assignment, Slater had begun to break through the cloak of musical-theatre anonymity. Meanwhile, his wife Wilf, originally from outside Philadelphia, was not yet pregnant with their first child. She and her husband were collaborating on a new musical of their own called *Beatsville*.

At the end of our first meeting, Slater did what many writers do: He handed me a demo CD for a show. The recording was of a musical he had started working on in 2001 with another writing partner, Stephen Weiner. Scribbled on the CD was a title familiar from a popular 1994 Coen Brothers film, *The Hudsucker Proxy*. I went home and listened to it. I thought, "Wow! These guys are talented!" That was seven years ago. Just recently it was announced that *The Hudsucker Proxy* is slated for a "Page to Stage" workshop production at California's [La Jolla Playhouse](#) later this year, with a Broadway production scheduled for 2010.

A few other projects currently on Slater's very full plate: *Sister Act* with Menken, which has received productions at [Pasadena Playhouse](#) in Southern California and [Alliance Theatre](#) in Atlanta and is due to open in the West End at [London Palladium](#) this May; the gospel musical *Leap of Faith*, a work-in-progress also with Menken; the sequel to *The Phantom of the Opera* with [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#); and a new musical with Danny Elfman.

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As you can imagine, for Slater there's a lot of jetting back and forth these days between Los Angeles, New York and London. **Then there's life at home, where a little magic continues to brew with *Beatsville*, which I (along with a few other fortunate attendees) was able to catch a glimpse of at the National Alliance for Musical Theater (NAMT) new-works presentations this past October.**

Beatsville is based on the Roger Corman cult film *A Bucket of Blood*. "As a script and as a film," Slater says, "it's very unformed. The characters aren't really characters the way we think of them in theatrical terms—they're more like placeholders in the narrative. But Wendy and I were attracted to the film precisely because it is short and not fully developed. We didn't have to worry about dismantling a great film in order to resize it for the stage. For us the question was, 'What do we need to add to make this a viable story?' It was an idea in search of its final form."

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Balance is a central theme in the life and art of Slater and Wilf, who first met at the BMI Workshop in New York City. "As a married writing team, we have to balance our 'life' with our writing life," Slater says. "There's no space between the personal and the professional." Wilf agrees. "We can be out to dinner and come up with solutions to writing problems without thinking of it as 'working.'"

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When I ask Wilf if it is hard for her to be living and working with another songwriter, she avows, "Not at all. If anything, it's been inspiring. If we were both lyricists competing to work with the same composers, maybe that would be more difficult." The good news is that Wilf is both a lyricist *and* a composer (on *Beatsville*, Slater is only writing the book).

Wilf's voice is unique in the musical-theatre world. Though she can write in virtually any style, it was a two-year immersion in jazz that opened up the possibility of *Beatsville*. As she says, "In my late twenties I got an opportunity to go back to school for a master's degree in jazz piano at the Manhattan School of Music. I wasn't going to get all these jazz chops so I could write a musical—I wanted to be a musician. But sure enough, after two very intense years of playing nothing but jazz, I was ready to go back to musical theatre. And the idea of being able to fuse these two worlds together seemed very exciting."

Where most writers start with the story or plot (and then suss out the best musical style), Slater and Wilf approached *Beatsville* differently. They said, "We want to write a jazz-style musical—now let's find a property that lives in that world." As Slater notes, "The musical style and the visual vocabulary of the beatnik era seemed like a fun place for a show to be. The language is so rich. By 'beatnik,' I don't mean the Beats, who were serious artists, but rather the hipsters and wannabes who followed in their wake and made bongos and goatees the fad of the hour. That was actually a very brief cultural moment—you can count the actual films and books that are set in a beatnik milieu." Slater and Wilf soon zeroed in on *A Bucket of Blood*, a semi-obscure relic from the late '50s that satirized the scene as it was developing. Now they faced a tricky balancing act. As Wilf explains, "How were we going to make the jazz vocabulary feel authentic, but have it still be accessible to a musical-theatre audience?"

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Wilf decided to write the score in the freewheeling style known as bebop. For the lyrics, she called upon a technique, also popular in the late '50s, known as "vocalise." As Wilf describes it, "In traditional vocalise, you let a jazz player improvise an instrumental solo, and then use that melodic line as the basis for the lyric. For the theatre, however, the vocalise was a challenging device to figure out. Do I write music first? Do I write the lyric first? When I tried it the traditional way, playing a jazz solo and laying the lyrics over the top, it didn't have the structure that a song needs to stay coherent. Likewise, writing lyrics first led to

songs that felt a little too symmetrical, and lacked the excitement of the jagged bebop rhythm. Ultimately, only a lot of painstaking back-and-forth got the vocalise to work on both levels."

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While Slater is working with some of the biggest names in musical theatre, crossing the country in one direction and the ocean in another, Wilf takes care of their boys and keeps carving away at *Beatsville*.

They both know that they need a workshop to help clarify the story that they're trying to tell.

But meanwhile, they're tuned into the key ingredients of a successful writing partnership: 1) Agree that you are both telling the same story; 2) Be brutally honest with each other; and 3) Love, trust and respect each other. As Slater says about this particular working relationship, "That last challenge isn't really a challenge—it's a kind of joyride to be working with my wife."