Written by Mike Schulz
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Odd as it may seem now, there actually was a period in the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's history – a run of 12 shows, to be precise – in which the company didn't produce any musicals whatsoever. Yet after staging a dozen plays between June 2008 and May 2009, co-founders Tristan Tapscott and Chris Walljasper chose to open the theatre's second season with a production of Jonathan Larson's rock musical *tick ... tick ... BOOM!*

The result? "We had bigger crowds than we'd ever had," says Tapscott, who also serves as the Hilltop's artistic director. "And the general consensus from people was, 'We'd love it if you guys would do *more* musicals.' And Chris and I were both like, 'Well, that's not what we were *going* to do ... .'

"But just like every theatre in the nation," he continues, "we discovered that those shows *sell*, and can keep our doors open. So while we had an affinity for plays, at the end of the day it was like, 'Either we do more musicals here, or we have to close.'"

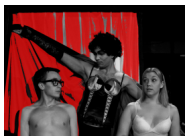
Two years after *tick ... tick ... BOOM!*'s debut, the Hilltop is now known *primarily* for musicals – and for some rather intimidating musicals, to boot.

To be sure, the theatre has produced relatively small-scale musical works – among them *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*
and
I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change –
and will continue to with July's two-character romance
The Last Five Years
.

A number of the Hilltop's other musicals, though – including April's acclaimed *Sweeney Todd* – have been anything
but
small-scale, despite venues in Davenport (the company's former location at 1601 Harrison Street) and Rock Island (the current District Theatre location at 1611 Second Avenue) that would seem far too intimate for productions that generally require large casts, complicated sets, and exorbitant budgets.

"But I once read this quote by a New York producer named David Binder," says Tapscott, "and he said that a show should always be bigger than the theatre it's in. A show should be bursting at the seams, basically. And I've kind of based a lot of what we do on that. 'Yeah, the space is technically too small for what we're doing, but the energy's gonna be *so* cool.'"

With the Hilltop opening its fourth season with one of its most challenging endeavors yet – the vocally and emotionally demanding rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, enacted by a 21-person cast – Tapscott recently shared some thoughts on the company's history with big musicals, and the potential debate over its latest production. (Hint: Not all of Jesus' disciples will be played by men.)



***The Rocky Horror Show* (October 2009)**

Following tick ... tick ... BOOM!, *with its three-person cast and pre-recorded CD tracks, the Hilltop assembled a live band and 13 performers for Richard O'Brien's cult – and audience-participation – classic, with co-founders Tapscott and Walljasper (until recently a* Reader
employee) making their first appearances in a company production.

I did that show in college and it was just a *riot*, and I was like, "Man, nobody's done that live in the area, and I think it would be a huge, huge thing." And now, we do it once a year, and it helps keep us open – that's the show that I take reservations for all year long.

We don't have a lot of people at auditions, typically, which is why we use a lot of the same people over and over again; they're the ones that show up. So *Rocky* kind of established our core group. We got Paul Workman out of that, and Sara King, and Cari Downing, Lisa Kahn, Steve Lasiter ... . And I don't remember who it was that suggested it, but somebody was like, "Why don't you and Chris be in it?" It was never our goal to open the theatre just to be in shows, but finally we were like, "Well, we've been open for over a year ... . I guess we could do that now."

At the first few performances, there were a few people that would call out things, but mostly it was like, "This is *live* ... are we *allowed* to do this?" It took people coming back – a lot of repeat business – for it to really work. And now it's just kind of understood. You can go to the Hilltop, yell and scream at a bunch of live people, and hit them with things.

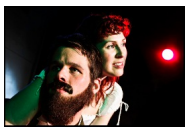
***Rent* (April 2010)**

Jonathan Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winner featured a cast of 14, and Tapscott, who portrayed Mark in the production, felt that the Broadway smash greatly benefited from its intimate Hilltop

setting.

You don't want to be the company that screws up *Rent*. You don't want to be known for that. And we were a little concerned because again, audition-wise, we didn't have that great of a turnout. Thankfully, though, we got some really, really talented people. And luckily, we had a lot of really talented friends.

I knew enough about the show, because I'd seen it a bazillion times. But something I always thought about the show was that a lot of the meaning was lost if you saw it in the balcony at a big production, like at the Netherlander in New York. You don't get the *emotion*. At the Hilltop, you had no choice
but
to engage with the actors, and really see the emotion in actors up close and personal.



***Sunday in the Park with George* (June 2010)**

Another Pulitzer winner was staged in Stephen Sondheim's masterpiece about neo-impressionist painter Georges Seurat, a notoriously demanding and – given the period sets and costumes for more than a dozen performers – costly *musical that, in most productions, finds Act I climaxing with its cast posed against a large-scale reproduction of Seurat's*
A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte
.

We had been told by several people that we were gonna lose money on this. By that point, we had a board [of directors], and everyone on the board was like, "It's a mistake. Don't do it. You might *close*." Because it's a really expensive show. But when we decided to do musicals, it was kind of a goal to do one of Sondheim's a year, and we figured we might as well start with one of the more difficult ones. Because if we could figure *that* one out, we could probably figure out *Sweeney Todd* an

d other things.

We knew there were going to be limitations. And there was a lot of discussion early on about, "Should we try to get a painting for that last moment? We could probably design one *some* way ... ." But it became very clear, once we got into production, that we didn't need it. We knew that if we could make up for it by really focusing on the storytelling and the musicality, then people were gonna buy the product. Sets and stuff are great, but if you don't believe the *actors* ... .

Luckily we had such talented people in it, and that was the first show that Danny White music-directed. He re-orchestrated Sondheim for *three instruments*. It was amazing. And the show went very, very well, and sold out almost every night. I didn't expect it to do quite as well as it did. But I didn't expect it to do as poorly as the projections, either.

And there was really something interesting about the way [director] David Turley used the space: He put actors clear back to the bathrooms, an area we had never used before, and so there was no problem fitting that many people. I took some pictures of that last moment, and it looked *just like* the painting.

***Jesus Christ Superstar* (July 2011)**

The Hilltop's latest is director Turley's production of the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice rock opera, which boasts the largest cast in the company's history, Tapscott in the title role, and the untraditional casting choice of Sara Speight (née King) as Judas, after the actor originally cast in the role was forced to drop out.

David and I were talking about a few different options for Judas – maybe moving somebody in the ensemble up – and when we were at the Hilltop yard sale a while ago, Sara King just jokingly said, "Well, *I* can play Judas," and walked away. And we were like, "Hmmm ... that's actually a great idea. And controversial, too."

There's *already* a few controversial things about the show, because we're setting it in the late '60s, and the temple scene has drug-dealing and things like that. But we figured that Sara's Judas would be an interesting little twist on things. If anything, at least at times, that's kind of what we're known for: doing something that gets people talking.

I know we have some season-ticket-holders that are already not coming, just because of the show's theme and the female Judas. I've had several people say, "We'd really like to support you, but we can't come to see that show." But that's all right. It's gonna be the best-sounding cast we've ever had. I mean, there's John VanDeWoestyne, Brian Nelson, Shelly and Krianna Walljasper, Jenny Winn ... . Top-to-bottom amazing. And Sara can sing the crap out of Judas. My God, I mean, her vocals are *ridiculous*. So we're just gonna see what happens. I mean, it's our third anniversary. We might as well challenge ourselves.

Jesus Christ Superstar *runs July 7 through 31 and plays in repertory with* The Last Five Years*, running July 13 through 30. Performances are held at Rock Island's District Theatre, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)235-1654*
or visiting
HarrisonHilltop.com
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