

AMERICAN THEATRE

A PUBLICATION OF THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP



Mike Sulprizio, Matt Walker, Rob Nagle, and Joseph Leo Bwarie in Troubadour Theater Company's "Julius Weezer." (Photo by David Elzer)

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Et Tu, Troubie? The Making of 'Julius Weezer'

L.A.'s resident classic rock clowns take a stab at Shakespeare's Roman tragedy.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT

Please don't spread this around: There have been times, dear reader, when I have been bored at the theatre. Sometimes it's the play, sometimes it's me, but—perhaps this has happened to you?—I have on a rare occasion or two found my mind wandering far, far away from the people onstage to even more mundane matters, or if I'm lucky to more vivid ones. One mental pastime that has proven to happily occupy my thoughts in these

infrequent moments of distraction: dreaming up titles for Troubie shows.

By “Troubie,” I refer to the [Troubadour Theatre Company](#), one of the indispensable treasures of the Los Angeles theatre scene for a few decades now, who have minted an unholy blend of clownish classics and classic rock. Why would coming up with titles for potential Troubie shows make such a fine brain vacation, you ask? Just consider some of the iconic mashups they’ve unleashed on the world thus far: *A Midsummer Saturday Night’s Fever Dream*, *Fleetwood Macbeth*, *Romeo Hall and Juliet Oates*, *OthE.L.O.*, *Hamlet, the Artist Formerly Known as the Prince of Denmark*, and my personal favorite, *The Comedy of Aerosmith*. Each has taken the skeleton of an old warhorse, dressed it in a familiar pop/rock catalogue, and sealed the deal with loose-limbed, high-grade clown action, up to and including stilts, ridiculous moustaches, crowd work, and lazzi.

This all may sound like a stunt, and to a degree it most definitely is—but I can testify that the Troubies are some of the finest stunt workers, in all senses of the word, I’ve seen grace a stage. As I discovered in a recent conversation with their leader and chief clown, Matt Walker, the whole enterprise started out with a title pun, though it has since widened to include a broader range of dramatic material, a series of popular holiday shows in a similar vein (*It’s a Stevie Wonderful Life*, *A Year Without Santana Claus*), and commissions from the likes of the Getty Villa to stretch out beyond Shakespeare (*Oedipus the King*, *Mama*, for instance, married Sophocles and Elvis).

This weekend the Troubies open their newest Shakespeare-jukebox-parody mashup, [Julius Weezer](#), at North Hollywood’s El Portal Theatre (it runs May 4-19). I spoke to Matt from the midst of rehearsals. Read to the end to sample some of my own Troubie title suggestions.

ROB WEINERT-KENDT: Clowning and classics obviously go well together, from commedia dell’arte to the Reduced Shakespeare Company. But the rock music really sets the Troubies apart. How did that come into the mix?

MATT WALKER: It really just came out of throwing titles around. We had produced a ver-

sion of *Taming of the Shrew* just called *Shrew!*. The next year we did production called *Spamlet*, which was basically *Hamlet* but with a bunch of crazy songs thrown in and stuff. And then one day somebody mentioned the band Three Dog Night, and *Twelfth Dog Night* came out. Then it was sort of a mad scramble to see how many we could come up with. That was in 1995. A *Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream* was the summer after that, and then *Romeo Hall and Juliet Oates*, *All's Kool that Ends Kool*, *A Comedy of Aerosmith*, *Hamlet*, *the Artist Formerly Known as the Prince of Denmark*, *Much A Doobie Brothers About Nothing*, *Oth-E.L.O.*, *As U2 Like It*, *Two Gentleman of Chicago*. Then we did the Getty commission of *Oedipus the King*, *Mama*. Am I leaving any out? Oh, *Fleetwood Macbeth*, of course.

So it's one thing to come up with the titles, but then building the shows—how have you gone about that? Is it about stretching the songs to fit the story, sort of?

Yes. *Julius Weezer* was interesting, because it was reverse-engineered like *Fleetwood Macbeth* was: "Wow, what a great title, now let's go see what kind of music they have." We all know maybe two or three Weezer songs from the radio, but they have 13 albums they've released since '94, so there was lot of depth and breadth in terms of musical style and exploration. I mean, to hit the nail on the head, they have a song called "[Cleopatra](#)." So we are bringing parts of *Antony and Cleopatra* into *Julius Caesar*, because through historical research I had done I found out that Cleopatra was in Rome at the time of Caesar's assassination, and she had a son with Caesar.

The more I delved into it, the more of their songs I found that fit the story. When Cassius is trying win Brutus over to the conspiracy he sings "Cold Dark World," which is a song about the bleakness that we find ourselves in. And with Brutus, when he's giving his pitch to the conspirators he sings a song called "Brave New World," about how we're gonna take our chance and reimagine this. And then it was about finding a way to work the hits in, songs like "[Buddy Holly](#)."

Where does that go?

We gave it Caesar and changed the lyric to "Woo-ee-ooh, I look just like Julius Caesar/But

I'm Julius Caesar's ghost." In some cases, we didn't have to change the lyrics at all. They have this song "The Greatest Man That Ever Lived" on the Red Album from 2008, and Rivers Cuomo does a spoken speech that starts with, "Somebody said all the world's a stage and the rest of us are players," and it goes on from there. That was something we could just transplant right into the funeral for Caesar and it worked word for word.



Beth Kennedy and Joseph Loe Bwarie in "A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream."

In some cases in the building of a show, we really do change the lyrics; we make a song like Prince's "Raspberry Beret" into "Raspberry Rosé," and it's all about drinking wine in Napa. But in some cases, like in *A Wither's Tale*, which was *A Winter's Tale* with the music of Bill Withers, we used "Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone" when Leontes was mourning the loss of Hermione; it was perfect and we didn't change a word. In some cases, we have to be a little more ribald or a little more cheeky or whatever it calls for. With *Julius Weezer* we

were able to find songs that really fit the tone, fit the mood, and in lots of cases the lyrics, so we didn't have to change too much.

That play also has...

Obvious political overtones, right, but we really wanted to stay away from that as much as possible because it's so in our face everyday. We don't really need to go and see that on the stage. The Public Theater already did that version with [Caesar as the president](#).

But you're staying away from that.

Yeah, from the Trump trope. You know, we want to tell the story. Everyone knows that Julius Caesar was assassinated. But what happened after, and who are the characters that were involved? So our approach is to just tell the Shakespeare story with 21st century music. The tough part has been getting it to a manageable length. We want to keep so much of the stuff that's compelling but it's two hours.

The productions of yours I've seen were pretty cut down. Between the clowning and the music, there isn't time for a ton of original Shakespeare text, right? And I think I've only seen comedies. When you do a tragedy, do you play the sad stuff straight or camp it up?

The most successful we've been is when we really tried to go for the heightened theatricalization and the drama of the tragedies. But we've treated them completely differently. In cases like *Romeo Hall and Juliet Oates*, it was more of a fluffy farce; Romeo is dressed like John Oates and Juliet has the long, blonde flowing locks of Daryl Hall; we dropped a disco ball, and when she came out for the balcony scene she was on stilts with fake legs hanging over the balcony. It was like we ignored the tragedy completely.

But the more we've evolved and matured, we found that a lot of our actors have the range and the Shakespearean training. So if we can serve the story and still find those diversions that the Troubie fans have come to expect, that sort of earmark the brand, you get the best of both worlds. So a show like *OthE.L.O.*, which had only 10 songs, was more like a 60-

40 drama-comedy ratio, and that really worked well. And in *The Wither's Tale* we really played it straight, except for the scenes where they go to the country and [Beth Kennedy](#) and I are wearing tooth black and clowning erupts.

That's been the approach on this one too. There are certainly characters we've earmarked to be the clowns. But it's a balancing act going back and forth between really heightened drama, serving the expectation of the assassination scene, and then also having fun if a cell phone goes off or latecomers show up.

Do you still throw down a "foul" flag when a performer messes up and make them go back and do it over?

Oh yeah. God help us if we didn't have that safety net. You know, the economics of theatre these days dictate that I can barely get the actors for the three-week process as it is, with all the conflicts. So by the time we get into performance, it's still a shaky ship we're trying to steer. Any iceberg that occurs, I'll deploy the foul-flag life raft to keep everybody up. I think the actors know and appreciate that too. They know it's a little bit different circumstance in a Troubie show, and that the mess-ups will be part of the action, part of the fun.

So are those all real? I always wondered if you planned a few, like an acrobat messing up a few times before they nail the stunt.

No, in no case have we ever done that. The audience can sniff that out, especially the ones that are coming multiple times. That doesn't mean I don't look for opportunities or intentionally let people slip up—you know, somebody might mumble a word or two here or there, or think they got away with a paraphrase, and if I think it's appropriate, we'll throw the foul flag and call them on it. It's something the audience might not even notice, but we did and we're going to make fun of you for it.



Katie Kitani, Katie DeShan, Rick Batalla, Joseph Leo Bwarie, Niles Rivers, and Cloie Wyatt Taylor in "Little Drummer Bowie" at Falcon Theatre. (Photo by Sasha A. Venola)

I heard something about members of Weezer sitting in with your band, is that true?

We've got Scott Shriner, who's been the bass player since 2001 and has been coming to Troubie shows for about 10 years because his wife and our costumer are best friends. So when the idea came up for this one I reached out to the band and said, "Would there be any chance....?" And they said, "Well, we're on a world tour because we're rock 'n' roll stars, but when are you doing it?" And I said, "In May." And they said, "Actually, we'll be done with Coachella at the end of April and Scott would love to come and sit in." So Scott will come in and jam with the band and sing with the actors. The ask has been put out to Rivers Cuomo, the lead singer, to show up as well. He's a Shakespeare fan, apparently; he's got a sticker of Shakespeare's bust on the guitar he plays onstage.

Has this happened before?

This will be the third or fourth time we've had a musician from one of the bands jam with us. We had Chuck Negron from Three Dog Night, in his tight leather pants as he was getting ready to promote a book tour about the stuff he could still remember. And we had couple of guys from Chicago show up, Danny Seraphine and Robert Lamm, who both got up onstage with us. We are collecting rock stars.

And you've never had to worry about rights because it's all fair-use parody, right?

That's the way we've operated, under the fair-use of the First Amendment. We have received inquiries from some of the publishers, notably Leonard Bernstein's publishers when we did *A Christmas West Side Story*. Also the Bill Withers estate. We have kind of a boilerplate letter that says, this is what we assume to be fair use, and if you'd like to come and see the show or view the intellectual property, fine; and here's the size of the house. We're very transparent and up front. We always sort of end it with, "If this has legs at any point, we'd love to get back in a room with you and figure out some kind of licensing deal so that everybody's happy."

That's sort of the path that we went down with *Julius Weezer*, because we knew Scott. We reached out to him and said, "Hey, we're doing this, and is there a chance we can get a piece of paper that says you won't sue us, with the potential of negotiating a license if the show were to move forward?" We got all that stuff handled and out of the way ahead of time. The hope would be that there's a chance with some of the other shows and artists we've done to create the same kind of arrangement, and find the next *Jersey Boys* for some of these catalogues.

I have to say, when I saw *Head Over Heels*, I thought of the Troubies, the way they shoe-horned Go-Gos songs into an Elizabethan romance. They were sometimes a stretch but that was part of the fun.

I was bummed that it closed so soon. We really wanted to come out and see that one.

It was kind of special. I don't think it went as far as it could have, and I think that may

have been because Jeff Whitty got kicked off the show for some reason; the marriage of the Go-Gos and Sidney's *Arcadia* had been his idea, and his sensibility was kind of the glue. Because it closed fairly early, I wonder if it means we won't see any more shows like that—more ambitious ways to use a popular catalogue.

That's why we've been sort of scratching our heads over the years. These stories we're doing, these Shakespeares, are tried and true, and the music we're using in most cases is complementary. So where is that niche? Why, in the 20-plus years we've been doing this, have we not been able to attract the kind of producing partners who are able to see the landscape and go, "This fits right in"? We've got 20-plus shows in the catalogue already. That's been the rock that we're pushing up hill and exploring, no stone unturned: cruise ships, a Vegas installation, Off-Broadway or a showcase. The more we learn, the longer we hang around, the more people we talk to—and now with the Weezer music, securing a deal ahead of time, we've got some momentum. But then again, we see these shows come and go: *The Saturday Night Fever* musical, and apparently there's going to be a [Hall and Oates](#) show.

Garry Marshall was one producer who saw your potential, right?

Yeah, he was terrific about helping us build the brand and create the following and giving us the showcase at [the Falcon Theatre](#). Then we eventually outgrew that space. This year will be our third year at the El Portal, which is a 350-seat venue. The challenge there is maintaining the intimacy, so that when you see somebody reading their program in the seventh row after the show's started we can still call them on it.

It's funny you say the Troubies brand started out with a title pun. Because I need to tell you that when I've been bored, sometimes at the theatre, I've occupied my brain by coming up with titles for Troubies shows.

I've got a list too.

For instance, you've never done a Beatles one, have you?

No. The only real title that we ever came up with that we thought might work was *Henry the Fifth Beatle*.

That's not bad.

It's just Henry the Fifth, you know, in a Beatle wig, and he's got the Liverpool accent.

So some Beatles ones I came up—are you ready?—were *Sgt. Pepper's Love's Labour's Lost Club Band...*

Oh, that's pretty good.

And *Othello Submarine*, but you've already done *Othello*.

That's pretty good.

I also thought of *Hendrix the Fifth*.

We were thinking of *Keith Richards the Third*. We also had *Little Richard the Second*. And *Cymbeline*, *Why Can't You Be True?*, with the music of Chuck Berry.

You're much better at this than I am. How about *Titus Andronicus*?

Titus Nirvanicus.

That material would totally work with that music. Or maybe *Primus Andronicus*?

Maybe. You pull a muscle stretching for that one?

I'm not gonna quit my day job.