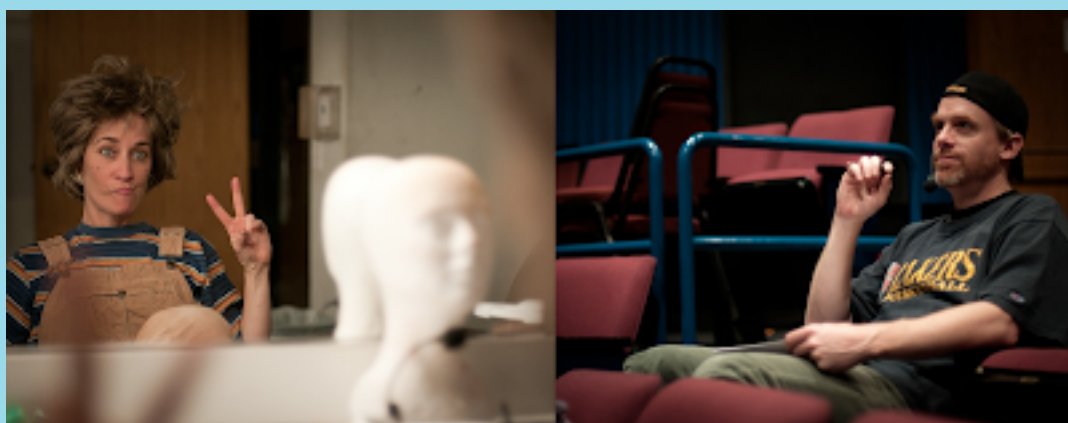


MUSICALS IN LA

Celebrating Theatre in Southern California

Thursday, May 2, 2019

A Conversation with Matt Walker and Beth Kennedy, the King and Queen of Troubie Land



Beth Kennedy and Matt Walker

When it comes to developing a loyal fan base, **Troubadour Theater Company** has found the secret: do outstanding work, stay true to your aesthetic, and give the people what they want - a great time at the theater. Artistic Director **Matt Walker** started the troupe and, with the help of longtime friend and foil, **Beth Kennedy**, continues to lead his merry band into the great theatrical unknown. Next up for the company is *Julius Weezer*, which combines Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the music of **Weezer** to tell its tale of political intrigue Troubie style. Today, they talk about what it's like putting together a new show and why they keep on coming back for more.

Matt and Beth, you're about to open the latest in a long line of Troubie



originals developed over the last 25 years. How would you characterize this show?

Name: Ellen Dostal,
MusicalsInLA
Location: Los Angeles, CA,
United States

Matt: It's a joy. It's the first original Shakespeare we've done in about seven years. The last one was *Two Gentlemen of Chicago* and that was a more lighthearted comedy with the music of Chicago. *Julius Weezer* is the tragedy everybody knows with all the hard-driving rock, dissonant chords, and minor keys of Weezer. It really has been an exploration of the depths of darkness and what parallels can we draw with *Game of Thrones*. The series is very stylized and heightened in its own way and its fans really get into it. We kept that in mind in the build of this show.



The cast of Julius Weezer (2019)

You're known for comedy but you've had just as many drop dead moments of authentic drama in your Shakespeare productions where the audience is so engaged you can hear a pin drop.

Beth: That's what we're aiming for. A lot of us are classically trained and we have some of the best actors in this cast, like Rob Nagle and Morgan Rusler and Andy Robinson. From the beginning, Matt came into this as a true, pure Shakespeare lover. He fully understands the text and he knows how to access it, so we help people understand the story just by the way we tell it. We're going for those pin drop moments.

Matt: It can be hard for the Troubie actors who are used to the buffoonery and the chicanery and the ridiculousness. Sometimes it's difficult to steer them back and get them to play the darkness and trust that the funny will come when it should come. To serve the story and the tragedy, and to expose the emotional depth to which we can go if we allow ourselves, is challenging in its own way.

A Withers Tale [*The Winter's Tale* + Bill Withers' music] is a great example where Beth and I were out there every night yelling and screaming at each other, and crying and serving the play, and then two scenes later we're both wearing tooth black and a fright wig when the play moves out to the country and now we're the bumpkin farmers. It really is fun for us to play both sides of the coin and show off the range of the company – to be true to the story and, at the same time, be true to our brand – which is the sublimely ridiculous.

Is that what you set out to do when you first started?

Matt: In 2007, we did a 75-minute stripped-down production of *Othello* with the music of E.L.O. The goal was to be serious because, at the time, we were running in rep with *Alice in One Hit Wonderland*. We wanted one show to be fluffy and fun and the other to be sort of dark and spooky, but we found out pretty quickly that the Troubie audience's expectations wouldn't allow it to be purely serious. So, right after the first couple of previews, the ratio – which had been about 80/20 percent serious/funny – moved closer to 60/40. Since then, it's been a goal to get back to that original ratio. Let's play it as straight as we can and know that the humor will seep through the cracks.



Alice in One Hit Wonderland / OthE.L.O.

How did the two of you end up as “show spouses”?

Beth: Technically, Matt and I met before Troubie ever came to be. I went to Cal Arts and my first show out of CalArts was an original play, *Meet the Wilsons*, at Maria Gobetti and Tom Ormeny's Victory Theatre. We were cast as Fred and Robin, boyfriend and girlfriend. It's so goofy. **Greg Thirloway** was in that play too. Full circle, he's married to **Heather Lee**. Heather Lee is the daughter of Pegge Forrest, and Pegge is the Managing Director of the El Portal Theatre where we're doing *Julius Weezer*.

So, we hit it off really well, really fast. Matt has a comic sensibility like mine. I have a lot of brothers so I love his way of razzing you if he likes you. We'd be smartasses with each other, and we had a great time in that short run. That was in 1991. After that I did some legit Shakespeare in town, and he was doing his thing. Then, in 1995, he started Troubie. He kept saying, “BK, come and play with us,” because we stayed in touch that whole time, and finally I was able to make it work with my schedule.

The first Troubie show with a clever quote unquote title where we did the mashup was *Twelfth Dog Night*, and that was my first Troubie show. It was 1998. Matt said, “I want you to play an Italian man on stilts,” and I said, “Okay, I've not yet been cast as a guy.” I did some weird stuff at CalArts, and I've always had that ability. I don't want to just play the female. And I'd never been on stilts before so I was like, “Alright, I'm gonna give this thing a try.”

Matt: To use an old baseball analogy, it's like the Yankees were always the Yankees but then they got Babe Ruth.

Beth: Wow, that's like...wow. Thank you.

Matt: They were good and they won some championships, but then they got Babe Ruth on their team.



Rudolph the Red-Nosed ReinDOORS (2013) /Fleetwood Macbeth (2011)

What kind of shorthand have you developed over the years?

Matt: I always know I can trust her to find something or make something, even if it's out of very little, and it's going to benefit the whole. It's sort of like Babe Ruth is going to get his hits and his home runs so let me focus on some of these other players. This show is a great example. Beth is playing Calpurnia, the wife of Caesar, and Calpurnia has one scene in the show. But there are seven conspirators and some of them are very under-represented in Shakespeare's play. One of the characters is Metellus. Metellus is the first one on the assassination team who starts to distract Caesar but he only has five or six speeches in the whole play. So, okay Beth, you'll do that.

The shorthand is, here's one scene for Calpurnia and here's an underserved conspirator. I know that together we're going to find how to get you in the show in a way that will make the show better and make us all happy because we get to see Beth be Beth. And now the vocabulary shorthand, on a daily basis, is that we know each other enough to know if we write a joke, we're going to put the punchline at the end of the line, or she's going to come in after a quick change and there's going to be some reference to what just happened offstage, but we don't have to script that out because we know in the moment, in front of the audience, there's enough trust built up to just lob the ball back and forth.

How much of the show do you develop in rehearsals?

Matt: It really depends on how much we think we need to. In the last show, we developed a lot of the Heat Miser and Snow Miser scenes on stage in front of the audience. It's an "I'll see you out there" kind of an attitude.

Beth: It depends on the scene too. If it's one that is super mechanical, meaning there are head takes or the cues have to be really tight, then that'll take more rehearsal time. But, if we know in the middle there's going to be this twenty second loose area and we're gonna let ourselves tread water on stage and learn from the audience, then we'll just tread water and see what happens.



Haunted House Party (2016) / The Year Without a Santana Claus (2018)

Speaking as an audience member, sometimes the funniest things happens when a bit doesn't work.

Beth: Oh yeah, we almost try to make them not work sometimes. It's the best.

Matt: And that goes back to the shorthand. We know there are a certain number of lines we can say in the moment to bail ourselves out and sometimes the twinkle in the eye between us is who's going to get to that line first.

I think that works so well because you have a unique relationship with your audience. They go along with you because they've adopted you as "their" theatre company.

Beth: Most definitely. We let our audience in. We open the door wide. It's almost like we have sliding glass doors that are open the whole time and the draft is coming back and forth. We let them in on the jokes, and in on the jokes that don't necessarily work, and they are possessive. They really have taken us on as their theatre company and we love that. We want to continue that.

Where did the latecomer bit come from?

Matt: We knew as a company early on that L.A. audiences were notoriously late. I can't remember exactly how it started but it was an offhand remark where someone said, "we should just sing 'You're So Late' as they come in," and it was like, ha ha...wait a minute. We started it pretty early and then it took on its own life. The expectation of our audiences now is that the wheels will fall off at some point and they've come to want to see that as well.

We've had audience members bring people to the show and set them up. One night, somebody in the audience called one of their friends who was sitting four seats down so their cell phone would ring during the show because they knew we would stop. I literally came out and grabbed the cell phone. We called the number back to have a conversation and the phone

rang four seats over. Well, that turned into ten minutes right there. The guy came up on stage and we made him sit in a chair with a dunce cap on. People have come to understand that that's what's fun about a Troubie show, and they want to expose their friends to that as well. So they'll say, "Oh, they never start on time; don't worry about it."



A Charlie James Brown Christmas (2007) / The Comedy of Aeorosmith (2005)

Have you had other happenings over the years that have been memorable for one reason or another?

Matt: The recent thing is that we're having one of the band members come and jam with us again. Our first one was Chuck Negron [from Three Dog Night] for *Twelfth Dog Night*. He came to a performance at the Falcon and got up on stage with us in his tight leather rock and roll pants. Then we had two different band members from Chicago come – Danny Seraphine, the drummer, played with us, and Robert Lamm, one of the lead singers, was at a performance of *Two Gentlemen of Chicago*. And now Scott Shriner, Weezer's bass player, will be playing with us opening night. He's been coming to Troubie shows for about ten years with his wife Jillian and they've just started to bring their two young kids. Those are always memorable because it's exciting for the fans, and it's exciting for the actors. And we get to pay homage and say thank you...and hopefully their lawyer's not with them.

Another night, at the Falcon, someone in the third or fourth row on the aisle was reading a paperback book. As soon as the lights went up and the show started, the paperback came out, and he just sat there turning pages reading his book. We all noticed it, of course, and throughout the show, we worked in that every character would come out with a book at some point. Then the audience started noticing and we ended the act with all of us and our books crowding around this guy who was sitting and reading his book. He looked up, cracked a smile, and closed his book. The audience went nuts and we took intermission right there.



Fleetwood Macbeth (2011)

Matt: I think of you as the pied piper of mayhem. You're the leader of all the silliness. And Beth, have you ever seen the photo of all the little girls who dressed up like princesses for their princess week at dance class except for one who dressed like a giant hot dog? I tweeted it with the title, "In a sea of princesses, be a hot dog." It always reminds me of you and your off-kilter choices.

Beth: That's what I love. I'm always looking for that. What's everybody doing? I'm gonna do the opposite.

Matt: In fact, in *The First Jo-el* she played Hoffy, who worked at Hot Dog on a Stick.

Beth: So I actually was kind of like a hot dog. And the thing about Matt is, I'll come to rehearsal and be like, "Matt, I was thinking, what if this person is a Hot Dog on a Stick gal? I can have my husband make me a Hot Dog on a Stick lemonade pump," and then I found a girl in Alhambra who was fired from Hot Dog on a Stick because she didn't smile enough. I drove out there and it was like I was meeting Beyoncé. I said, "You actually have a Hot Dog on a Stick outfit?" They do not let you take those. So, I have a legit uniform, and that character turned into the most ridiculous thing in the middle of this world, in Jerusalem. I thank him every time he says, "okay, BK, let's see where this leads."

Matt: Yeah, that's the shorthand.

Beth: That's the shorthand, the trust.

Matt: That's the trust that's built over hours logged on stage together watching the craft be applied in front of people in the moment and trading back and forth. That's what I love about this company.

How has your performance aesthetic evolved?

When I look back at the development of the company, I see the maturity. Sometimes I watch the old shows and it was just Hellzapoppin. It was everything we could think of thrown into the show, sometimes story be

damned, sometimes for its own sake. But the evolution of the company and all of us having the life experiences we've had over 25 years, have given us so much we can use for the characters we play now. The emotional value has grown. The childlike glee for what we do is still there, but it's nice to see it evolve too.

Do you feel *Julius Weezer* is a pinnacle for you?

Matt: The goal is to always try to expand the company and create more opportunities, get the brand out there to compete in New York and take our chances with being the next overnight sensation that took 25 years to build. Each show is different in its own way. The last production, *The Year Without a Santana Claus*, featured legit dancers and it was a pinnacle in and of itself. The show was a light entertainment for families, and it featured the theatricality of the El Portal Theater and the company in a bigger space. So that was groundbreaking for us.

This show is reliant on, as Beth said, our grounded actors. The focus is on the storytelling and having the music serve the story. Instead of just putting the hits out there, we tried to go through the Weezer canon to find the songs that really fit the show, whether or not we thought people would recognize them. It's a pinnacle in that way because there are about seventeen different pieces of music in this show, which is more than we've ever done in any single play. We've got a kickass band that will bring the rock and roll, and we also have a cellist to help us move the soul.

Everybody knows the act that happens (the assassination) but the why and the wherefores, and the personal cost and the sacrifice involved, are really what makes Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* compelling, for me anyway. Hopefully, the synergy and the seamlessness of weaving song and story has reached a new level.



*L-R: Mike Sulprizio, Matt Walker, Rob Nagle and Joseph Leo Bwarie
in Julius Weezer (2019)*

You mentioned earlier *Game of Thrones*. Are you incorporating some of those characters into *Julius Weezer*?

Matt: Not everybody is a watcher of the show, but we talked a little bit about corollaries for those in the cast who are fans, so there will be a few mentions or homages. We wanted to dress BK's Calpurnia like the Red

Woman and have her say a line that I still haven't given her yet, which is a line a *Game of Thrones* fan will know, but we don't go full immersion because we want to preserve the Shakespeare telling of the Julius Caesar story. We want the audience to leave saying, "Oh, I didn't realize there were that many people involved," and to know who they were and what they felt.

Caesar is the title character, but he's typically not the most prominent figure in the play. The focus is really on the relationship between Brutus and Cassius, unless it is different in your production.

Matt: Yes, and on the relationship between Brutus and his servant, and Brutus and Portia, and in our production, between Mark Antony and Cleopatra. We've taken some scenes from *Antony and Cleopatra* and woven them into *Julius Weezer* because, according to my historical research, Cleopatra was in Rome at the time of Caesar's assassination. And, as we know, she had a child with Caesar, so we've incorporated that to show the effect and the sacrifice.

Are you using any circus elements in this show?

Matt: Not so much. We talked a little bit about bringing the trampoline on stage just to give, pun intended, a little bounce, but staging-wise it didn't fit. I might put the stilts on in the ghost scene, and we have a bunch of ghosts that come in and sing with Julius Caesar, which is where Weezer's "Buddy Holly" fits in. "Woo-ee-oooh, I look just like Julius Caesar / woo-ee-oooh, but I'm Julius Caesar's ghost." They have a lot of great songs and there are more that didn't make the cut that could have gone in, like "Cleopatra." We do use "Cold Dark World" which Cassius sings to convince Brutus that things aren't right, and "Brave New World" where Brutus is getting the rest of the conspirators on board.

They've got a song on the Red Album called "The Greatest Man That Ever Lived" and there's a speech in it that **Rivers Cuomo** makes at about the four minute mark that starts with "All the world's a stage" so we've incorporated that into the show. It's the speech that Caesar says at the end while everybody's lying dead around him and he's singing "I am the greatest man that ever lived."

You have a lot of familiar faces in the group that have become audience favorites over the years. How about a quick sentence for a few of your usual suspects?

Beth: To me, our secret weapon is **Rick Batalla** man. He is the secret sauce. I've known him for twenty years and he still makes me crack up in rehearsal. He's the youngest of a brood of kids, and I swear he's been trying to make people laugh since the day he came out of the womb.

Matt: He's the Swiss Army knife of Troubie.



Rick Batalla, Lisa Valenzuela, Matt Walker and Mike Sulprizio in A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream (2013)

Lisa Valenzuela?

Beth: Lisa V. She is mama Troubie. She brings so much soul and open arms to our audience and that's why we often start the show with her. She's great at getting the audience in that warm fuzzy place. Any time she's on stage people are glowing.

Matt: She makes people feel like they're at home. There's also **Mike Sulprizio**, who is our foundational, fundamental Shakespearean actor. Whenever I need somebody to either be the Shakespearean heavy or deliver the exposition, I go to him. He's so solid, and then he can completely transform himself and be a Sir Toby Belch type with the tooth black and the padded suit performing pratfalls.

Beth: Mike is all-purpose, an everyman. He has an amazing instrument. You can give him any role. He's a natural. I think he was a Shakespearean actor in another time.



Little Drummer Bowie (2016)

How would you describe your longtime musical director, Eric Heinly?

Beth: Eric is all-knowing and knows all. He's a musical genius. And he knows every musician in town.

Matt: Besides Beth and Rick and Lisa, I've known Eric the longest. He and I just seemed to understand each other so we have a shorthand and a trust that's there as well. He was really good friends with a musician named Henry Phillips who Rick and I performed with at a theater called Upfront Comedy in Santa Monica in the early '90s. Eric was just always hanging around with us. I knew he was a drummer and when we got to *Twelfth Dog Night*, Eric did some subbing in for us and the subbing in turned into a 23-year subbing in gig.

Beth, what about Matt?

Beth: Gosh, I am the most present as an artist when I'm on stage with Matt Walker. He does not allow you to check out for a minute. He has taught me more than any school has ever taught me about performance, and I love him dearly. Thank God for the Victory Theatre.

Matt, in addition to being your Babe Ruth, any other thoughts about Beth?

Matt: It's difficult to quantify that but there's a healthy competition to make the other person look good. So it's almost like I get more joy when I can lob her a soft ball that she can hit out of the park, and then I'll see her be like, oh, but I'm gonna lob you a soft ball. That's sort of what it is, knowing that you're going to go out there with somebody who's gonna really work to help make you look good, and how safe that is.

* * * * *

Julius Weezer runs May 4-19 (opening night 5/10 at 8pm) at the El Portal Theatre, 5269 Lankershim Blvd in North Hollywood. Tickets: 818-508-4200 or www.elportaltheatre.com.



Little Drummer Bowie (2003)



How the Grinch Stole Christmas (2017)



Matt Walker / The Snow QUEEN (2014)



Abbanemnon (2014) / A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream (2013)



Two Gentlemen of Chicago (2012)



A Christmas Westside Story (2011)