

Eric Quang Gelb

Commercial Musical Theatre & Live Branded Entertainment Directing Portfolio

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B.S. in Educational Theatre from New York University



On the stage, I strive to represent and reach diversity in all forms, specifically when bringing beloved IPs, franchises and classics to life. I feel there is a social responsibility to make this work inclusive, as an accessible vessel that inspires a life-long appreciation of the arts in all walks of life. I see its impact - in the eyes of every person who has saved enough to afford to see a Broadway show and finally sees themselves represented onstage to the smile of every child meeting Mickey Mouse for the first time. To me, creating these once a year (even once in a lifetime) memories is the same as what academia considers “high art”.

In the room, I prioritize safety and humanity through anti-racist praxis. I rely on my background in education to lead rooms as a patient, realistic and thoughtful collaborator - even with millions of dollars at stake and a ticking clock, I still push out an exceptional product without sacrifice.

The product that I create is full-out, sustainable and reflective of our world today. Detailed, clean and sleek. From ensuring that the shade that wig lace is tinted matches skin tones, to every harmony line's blend - each detail matters immensely to me.

MEAN GIRLS

In pre-professional musical theatre, the conundrum of choosing material is that there's never enough worthwhile roles for young people, especially women. The parts they are often relegated to reduce them to playing a caricaturistic second fiddle, ones that are far from their lived experiences (spoiler: teens are not singing cats). The opportunity for them to authentically play funny, flawed, fully realized characters like Regina and Damian is rare. As a former drama teacher, Tina Fey said she always knew a story that centers relational aggression among young women, with five female leads, would lead to incredible conversations.

And it has, for over 20 years. Because Tina has done what many creatives behind cult classics refuse: defy expectations of a carbon copy adaptation, in relentless pursuit of creating a (still funny) world that represents the diversity and comedy of today. Every production - Broadway, West End, Tour - are completely different. *Mean Girls* has transcended any one medium, generation, gender, identity or joke, because its heart has always remained about the endless, universal question of not just girlhood, but life: the natural instinct inside to be liked and belong among life's hierarchies, while not being too "mean". From school cafeterias to executive board rooms, there are divisions between "bosses" and "followers". But the rule of twos, as Karen says, means "everything is really two things". Accountability means we can't just shift between good and bad when we all play a role.

By acknowledging how unfair it is that young women are "divas", but boys "will be boys", the show asks us to help young women who have been granted social status harness their power - not scold them. I hope you remember that whomever the "Regina" is in your life, that *Mean Girls'* ethos still applies: calling someone stupid doesn't make you any smarter - and the people you don't like are still people. Treating each other with the dignity and respect to have conversations with, instead of about, each other - that is so fetch.





Roald Dahl's

Matilda

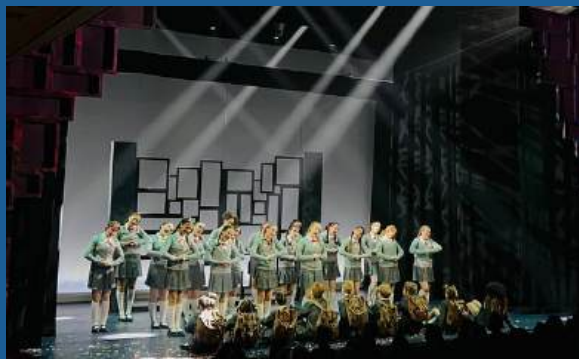
I've always felt that *Matilda* speaks to audiences across generations because it centers around transcendent themes: time and age. When we're young, we dream of who we'll be when we grow up. When we're old, we're disillusioned, feeling it's "too late". Our window of opportunity to reclaim our story, have a child, or even "grow up" entirely, is gone. But anyone "young" or "little" is taught never to dream of rebellion, revolt and revenge - especially over someone "old" or "big". And living in that binary is dangerous - because as *Matilda* reminds us, even if you're little, you can do a lot. The moment we leverage age or size over someone, their strength surprise us every time. It's too bad that we don't empower those like Matilda and Miss Honey. They don't angrily and insatiably seek suffering on those that wronged them like today's "cancel culture". They want to live peacefully, have a nice place to come home to. To be seen and heard.

The question of *Matilda* is: what are we actually looking for when we seek justice? Because Matilda and Miss Honey held the power to "change their story" to "put it right" the entire time. And, when they finally use the courage to do so, they do so sparingly. Why doesn't Matilda - and why hasn't Miss Honey - leveraged their abilities to take down their bullies tenfold?

Well, *Matilda* is a cautionary tale. Demanding too much to solve something (like how the Trunchbull exerts discipline on bratty children) only ends up perpetuating the problem (she ends up with a rebellion). Though unsatisfying, it's implied that both her and Matilda's awful parents make it out pretty scot-free. Because she has not needed time nor age to grasp a concept most adults cannot: sometimes we have to be a little bit "naughty". Only when it's necessary (in order to break cycles of abuse), should we step out of line to right a wrong. It's hard to know when, especially when voices in our head are telling us we're "pathetic". But nobody will do it for us, AND, once the deed is done - it is done.

It boils down to a simple reminder: never doubt the strength, intelligence and empathy of young people. Truly see and listen to them. Because we'll always be surprised by their boldness and courageousness, and feel inspired to ignite that same fire that still lives inside all of us, no matter how old we are.







Charlie is about legacy. The story itself has been passed down generation after generation, and for good reason: it's timelessly magical and special. Who doesn't want to see spoiled brats meet their demise, and the scrappy, plucky kid receive an award that he wasn't even working for? But when we decide to hang up our hat - literally or metaphorically - what (or who) legacy we leave behind?

Willy Wonka has lived a storied career, all in anonymity. Sure, he is a big personality, but his face is not on his product - just his name, only intended to represent something bigger than him. A reminder to the world to imagine, to dream, to play and to wonder. In a meta sort of way, he also left the world to wonder just who it was behind the curtain. So, whomever he chooses to succeed him and carry on this legacy must be just as selfless. It must always remain about the chocolate, not the person.

Roald Dahl loves a cautionary tale, and of course this one is famously about how, if we let it, our greed can become our legacy. They will forever be intertwined. "oh, they died because they just couldn't help themselves from _____".

It's mirrored in the comical, yet cringe inducing, Golden Ticket Winners. It makes you wonder - if our children are our legacy, when they are absolute terrors (as they all are), how does that reflect on us? How much of it is nature, and how much is nurture? Some of the parents genuinely seem to be pleasant people, yet their children are absolute terrors.

To add another layer of meta-theatricality, I believe that the legacy of *Charlie* in 2023 is about how - as long as we're living and breathing - that our legacy will never be truly final. Grandpa Joe's final legacy is not that he was some veteran who was bed-ridden in his final years, but someone who found the final oomph in him to spend one magical day with his grandson. Wonka's legacy is not just that he inspired wonder in millions, but that he believed in it enough to give it all up selflessly. And most importantly, Charlie Bucket, even if he may have seemed destined to remain a poor kid who got dealt bad cards in life, that that is not his legacy.





Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*

I studied Musical Theatre for Young Audiences for four years, so James has long been a dream show to direct. The material is - in my opinion - Pasek and Paul's best. It speaks to the young and young and at heart in a very profound way.

In our production, I sought to highlight the "meta theatricality" inherent in the script. The show asks its audience to do just what its protagonist is: to imagine, suspend disbelief and see things in a new light. It's really the only way we can "convincingly" tell a story about a giant peach landing on the Empire State Building - through encouraging and owning imagination as the strongest mode of storytelling.

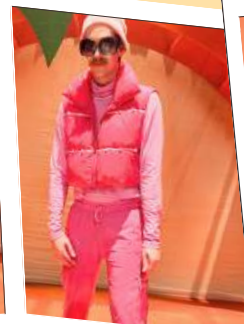
The opening number spells it out plainly: this is a retelling of a story performed by a pack of actors all in disguise. We have to allow ourselves to, just for a moment, pretend they really are a ladybug, a grasshopper, a spider. It perfectly parallels what James as a character might miss out on if he chooses not to imagine what his life COULD be like if he "shook things up".

Just as James has to accept that his new best friend is a six foot tall Earthworm, the audience, too, has to accept that they'll see the actors' transformation to their characters will happen *right before their eyes* - no smoke or mirrors. The undercurrent of the entire story is finding new perspectives, daring to dream and seeing what is possible when we see things in a new light.

It's how we finally land on James' new "found family": when James and the insects meet one another, both parties see each other objectively (an insect or a human). In order for them to accept each other as their newfound family, they must overcome internal biases and preconceived ideas of what one looks like.

As with many of the shows I direct, I also designed the wigs and makeup plot. I firmly believe that children's theatre is most effective when it's high-quality.

James is about the power of imagination and the limitless possibilities - even a peach flying - that we unlock when we use it.







Show Director, Character Experiences

Many people's first theatrical memories are not of Elphaba defying gravity or jellicle cats: it was when Junie B. Jones came to their school to sing about her "Top Secret Personal Beeswax". Maybe it was meeting Mickey, or seeing Big Bird dance down Sesame Street. It may not seem like high art to you - but it is critically important. Through making memories, it's sparking a lifelong love of the arts, and inspiring the theatergoers of tomorrow by introducing them to it (through the vessel of whomever is currently dominating the scene - maybe it's Blippi or Jojo Siwa).

While at New York University studying Educational Theatre, I spent four years studying how to create entertainment with from age-appropriate curriculum, or categorically called - "Theatre for Young Audiences". How to capture the attention of children, keep adults engaged and align with the core values of any given IP, all while making it diverse and inclusive.



Footloose

Footloose is a period piece. And yet, it still feels oddly similar — too similar — to the world today.

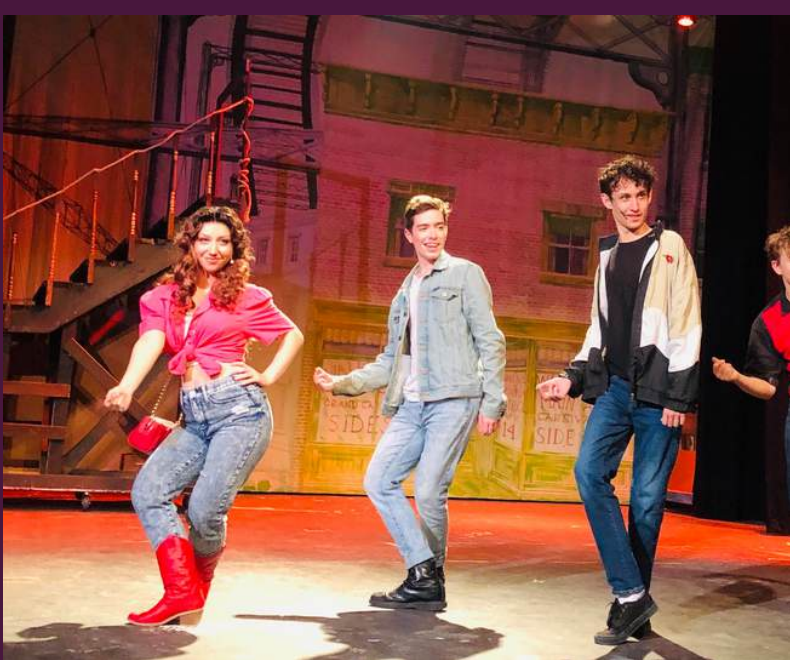
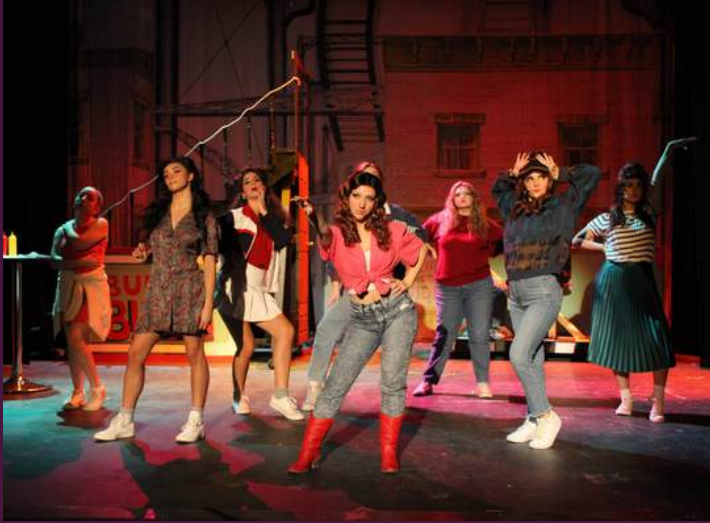
In directing this production, it was important that I be cognizant of the gender roles of the '80s. But how can a musical, whose second number is titled “The Girl Gets Around”?, only to be followed up by a group of women singing about how they’re “Holding Out For A Hero”, be self-aware and make a statement on whether or not it is endorsing its message?

The answer? Place the critical lens on the men who, steeped in tradition and doing what “is right”, have a too strong influence on their communities. So when the jerk boyfriend sings that Ariel, the preacher’s daughter, “gets around”, it begs the question: maybe the reason she has had more than one boyfriend is less about her “promiscuity”, and more about how lackluster men can be. It makes sense that they’re “holding out for a hero”: their dissatisfaction with men grows with age. This cast brings terrific shading to the qualities the women have, that have nothing to do with boys — Ariel’s dreams of academia, Vi’s gentleness, and Rusty’s loyalty.

Having a performer who is Black play Ren was not a “box I was looking to check”. I always hope to cast my shows diversely, but the fact is that Sam, who plays Ren, was the best suited. The optics of the show change when a company surrounds a performer who is Black, and sing to him: “careful what you do / Somebody’s eyes are watching / somebody’s eyes are seeing you come and go”. After the past year’s racial reckoning, I’m not afraid to say that, coming from a small town myself, where I was the sole person of color in every room: the Midwest has a problem embracing people that don’t look like their majority. I’m glad we get to include that in our storytelling.

In 2021, men need - I need - to loosen our control, and listen more. It reminds me of “Can You Find It In Your Heart?”, the show’s anthem (IMO): when we hold our beliefs too closely to ourselves, with great conviction, what are we missing from the world? And what does it mean, in the 80's, for the women to be the smartest, most collected people in the room?





The 25th Annual Putnam County SPELLING BEE

I immediately saw “*Spelling Bee*” as a site-specific piece, in a real gymnasium, where the audience would sit among the actors and around the room, just like a real middle school spelling bee.

I wanted to create a stimulating experience for the audience, so they could more closely sympathize with the emotional, grueling and devastating pressure of winning in adolescence. Winning: for your family, for your teachers, for yourself, and often, for a reason pre-pubescents have not yet found. By physically placing everyone in that space, stripping away the proscenium and fourth wall, the audience was able to painfully recall how incredibly awkward, stressful and challenging it is to be 12 and pushed in front of a microphone. Being in the space inspired the audience to relate better, then if they were to sit in darkness, simply watching and recounting those memories internally.

Even as an adult, when I walk into a school, my heart still skips a beat. I look at the walls, adorned with student artwork and rule posters, and feel like I never left. Presenting this show in a real gym, accompanied with a live orchestra, provided critical juxtaposition and contextualization on the pressure placed on young people to succeed. It made it impossible to forget that at the end of the day, the audience - and the spellers - were at a regional spelling bee in a hot gymnasium, competing for nothing but a plastic trophy and bragging rights.

The way that adults treat competitive educational experiences, as well as raising a child, has evolved, but the need and drive to be “win”, and how it is drilled into young people hasn't. What is the difference between a student like Logainne, who has had it impressed into her that she **MUST** win, and someone like Olive, who coincidentally has a talent for spelling because her parents are absent? I wanted to embrace but not rely on the material's known satire, and acknowledge more fully the fabric that each of the characters are cut come from, and how that shapes their experience of the Bee, and ultimately how they grow into adults.





LEGALLY BLONDE THE MUSICAL

People often ask why a TYA organization would produce Legally Blonde: “what about “the bend and snap” is appropriate for kids”? Well... what about seeing a woman confront her abuser in the courtroom isn’t a valuable lesson for both young people and adults alike?

What about a woman who defies the stereotypes of her looks her class, and intense misogyny to win a court case is inappropriate? Elle Woods travels across the country, leaves her friends and family to follow what she thinks is her dream boyfriend - and, in the process, gets admitted to Harvard Law, helps someone she hardly knows get her dog, life and self back, wins a court case, and earns the trust and friendship of several other powerful women. There’s a lot to learn from. And, if the young people in the audience can agree that it’s OK to sometimes consensually strut their stuff with the “Bend and Snap”, I’m all for it.

In 2007, when the show opened on Broadway, people pegged it as funny, fluffy and innocent show. Decades later, I think the meaning is deeper. Elle’s experience as a woman in a man’s world has sadly stood the test of time. Being unable to speak for that lived experience, I’ve constantly turned to my fantastic team - mostly comprised of women of color - to help me tell this story.

What I can speak to is Elle Woods’ incredible spirit. She is kind and polite to all, but never a doormat. She holds her truth and integrity closest to her. If everyone was a little bit more like Elle Woods - led with positivity, helped those in need out more, and of course, wore a bit more pink... I truly believe the world would be a better place.







Disney and CAMERON MACKINTOSH'S

MARY POPPINS

The story of *Mary Poppins* has stood the test of time, and for good reason. Underneath the magic of Mary and her umbrella, carpetbag and flights, there is a strong undercurrent of her and Winifred taking on and challenging roles in society that, in 1910 London, were completely unheard of. So, by having a woman of color portray Mary in our production, who has long been reserved for white women, the story takes on new shape and form.

Mary is incredibly bold. She refuses to let anyone – or any man, for that matter – tell her what to do. So seeing her as a woman of color is especially magical. She quite literally walks into the Banks home and positions herself as the best candidate for a job from an advertisement that hasn't even been posted yet – by interviewing the family, rather than them her. She sets a precedent as a perfect role model for the misbehaved Jane and Michael, the burdened Winifred and unhappy George to witness as they all comes into their own – with a touch of magic, of course. As Mary says, "anything is possible as long as we can get out of our own way".

Practically perfect... and I hope it remains so.



