

MAX UNDERSTOOD

Nancy Carlin and Michael Rasbury

Max Understood is the transformative journey of a 7-year old autistic boy and those who love him and how the need to communicate overcomes an unintelligible chasm. When Max escapes the apartment that he shares with his caring but overwhelmed parents, he encounters the neighbors in unexpected ways. This surreal musical for seven actors is created with sound design as integral to the script. The melodies are motivated by machines and dreams.

In the fall of 2006 composer Michael Rasbury and I conceived of the idea to create a piece of theater that with sound, music and text might theatrically convey the autistic mind to a “normal” audience. Michael’s son is autistic. While working together on another project he shared stories of what his son had done or said, and it seemed to me a unique and deeply profound way of communicating with “sampling” from films, songs, or television. These expressions of stunning and precise metaphor came from a boy with a condition that deflects the ability to grasp the abstract. This is perfect poetry. With Michael’s extraordinary talents as both a composer and sound designer, we should, I suggested, write a play about Max.

Max Understood, a sound-scaped musical, attempts to express how magical, strange, and sometimes scary or disorienting an ordinary day can be for an autistic child. Along the way, we discover perhaps an even more disorienting journey is in store for the parents of an autistic child; “we thought we wanted to fix Max, but Max fixed us.”

In November 2007 we participated in the Foothill Theatre Company’s “New Voices”. The feedback at the readings was extraordinarily positive and the debates over what had been experienced were quite lively and passionate. The revelation was that people seemed to go with the dreamlike experience we attempted to create. That many were sincerely moved was thrilling to us.

We were invited to the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s National Music Theater Conference in July 2008. Here, with superb collaborators, we had a very productive and inspiring session, and forged alliances with artists who encouraged us to boldly go forward and expressed desires to join us on the journey.

Our intention is to create an innovative and effective piece of theatre. We are attempting to find a new form of music-theater. This is by no means merely an “issues” piece. But we are also fully aware of the huge impact that autism is having on many families. In the United States, 1 out of every 130 children born will be diagnosed with autism. Judging from the reaction of audiences from our two workshops, Max Understood has the potential to inspire people to see our fellow autistic citizens in a new, appreciative way. And, it will represent and contextualize an abstract but recognizable experience to a growing number of theatre audiences.