

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

2015-16 SEASON

PLAYGUIDE

AUG. 26 - SEPT 20, 2015

THE LION

written & performed by
BENJAMIN SCHEUER

WHEN SEAN MET BENJAMIN

Inside the
development
of *The Lion*

SONGS IN MOTION

Animation breathes
new life into
Scheuer's music

MEET THE INSTRUMENTS

A moment in the
spotlight for
The Lion's guitars

SEAN DANIELS
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



ELIZABETH KEGLEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

EVA PRICE

STACEY MINDICH

WARNER/CHAPPELL MUSIC

TOM MCGRATH

SPRUCE LAKE THEATRICAL

JAMIE DEROY/HALEY SWINDAL/DAN SHAHEEN

ROBERT KRAFT

PRESENTS

THE LION

WRITTEN & PERFORMED BY

BENJAMIN SCHEUER†

SCENIC DESIGNER
NEIL PATEL

LIGHTING DESIGNER
BEN STANTON

SOUND DESIGNER
LEON ROTHENBERG

COSTUME CONSULTANT
JENNIFER CAPRIO†

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR
DOM RUGGIERO

TECHNICAL SUPERVISION
MIND THE GAP

GENERAL MANAGEMENT
MAXIMUM ENTERTAINMENT

DIRECTED BY

SEAN DANIELS

Originally produced in the United States by the Manhattan Theatre Club.
Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director, Barry Grove, Executive Producer, on June 10, 2014



PRODUCTION SPONSOR



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PLAYGUIDE

THE CAST OF *THE LION*



BENJAMIN SCHEUER (*Writer/Performer*) is the recipient of the 2015 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Solo Performance and a 2015 Theatre World Award for Exceptional Off-Broadway Debut, as well as a nominee for two Outer Critics Circle Awards, a Lucille Lortel Award, and an additional Drama Desk for Outstanding Lyrics.

THE LION premiered Off-Broadway in June 2014 at Manhattan Theatre Club and later returned to NYC in a commercial run at the Lynn Redgrave Theatre. Scheuer has performed the show at the St. James Theatre in London, where it won the 2014 Off-West End Award for Best New Musical. *THE LION* has since been touring the United States, including a recent sold-out run at Portland Center Stage. The show will be seen at venues such as Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and Arena Stage, throughout the 2015-2016 Season.

The animated music videos for Scheuer's songs "The Lion" and "Cookie-tin Banjo" have won prizes at the Annecy Film Festival, The Crystal Palace Festival, and the British Animation Awards (director/ animator Peter Baynton). With photographer Riya Lerner, Scheuer is co-creator of the book "Between Two Spaces," from which 50% of proceeds go to the Leukemia/Lymphoma Society.

www.BetweenTwoSpaces.com

Scheuer has toured with Mary Chapin Carpenter, and has performed at venues including Lincoln Center in New York and the Royal Albert Hall in London.

He records and performs with his band Escapist Papers, whose second album, "The Bridge" (produced by Geoff Kraly), was released in 2014. Scheuer is currently at work on an album called "Songs from *THE LION*."

He has been a writer-in-residence at the Goodspeed Theatre, the Weston Playhouse, and the Johnny Mercer Songwriting Workshop. He has been commissioned to write a new show by Williamstown Theatre Festival. Additional Awards include the 2013 ASCAP Foundation Cole Porter Award for songwriting and the 2013 Musical Theatre Network Award for Best Lyrics.

THE LION is a true story.

BenjaminScheuer.com @BenjaminScheuer

DIRECTOR'S NOTE



SEAN DANIELS (Director/Artistic Director) *"Tell the truth, and don't be boring"*
– Milos Forman's advice to playwrights

We thought about this a lot when we were making The Lion.

When I first met Benjamin Scheuer, he had four songs and a desire to tell the truth.

As happens with the development of musicals, only one of those songs – in its entirety – is still in the show. Another appears in an altered version and two, though wonderful, are gone. The rest have been written since we began.

The majority of my journey directing this solo piece was in the developing - coaching, pushing, pulling, gently shaping – of the material itself.

For example, when we were at the Weston Playhouse developing it, Ben talked about the letter he had written to his dad as a kid and how it haunted him. I suggested, as a way to unlock part of what was going on for him, that he write a letter to his father now. This, of course, made Ben burst into tears, and while he did it – I did what all good directors do, I ran across the street to the mar-

ket, bought the most expensive bacon they had, and cooked it for him. After he mailed it, we talked about what he would say if he could write more to him – and then the next morning he woke up and wrote the majority of "Dear Dad" which is the penultimate song in the show.

So, that's a bit of being a therapist, being a great friend, being a producer – basically in a solo show, whatever gets your performer to a great performance, that's directing.

And then from there, we just let the music tell his beautiful and life-affirming story.

Through Edinburgh, New York City, London and now Lowell – we've always been asking ourselves, how can this moment be more honest, and perhaps a little less boring?

Since then we've won "Best Musical" in the West End, The Drama Desk Award in New York City, the Theatre World Award, and played to sold out houses in New York, London, Portland and Edinburgh.

Now, we get to launch the national tour – and we get to do it in Lowell, at MRT – my first show of my first season in a show the whole country will see. Nothing boring about that.

It's the beginning of us taking MRT to the next level.

Thanks for doing this with me.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sean". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "S".

Sean

Q&A: SEAN DANIELS AND BENJAMIN SCHEUER

The *Lion* has its roots as an album called “The Bridge,” which Scheuer recorded with his band The Escapist Papers. The album included several autobiographical songs that would eventually evolve into *The Lion*.

Sean and Benjamin met at Goodspeed Musicals in Connecticut, and started developing their show at Vermont’s Weston Playhouse.

Here’s a handful of stories, in their own words, of how it all happened

Sean, what was it about this show that drew you in, made you say, “I want to direct that.”?

SEAN: About a year before I met Benjamin I had lost my father myself—and I had wanted to do something with that. I came across Benjamin, who was telling this fantastic story about his father. Benjamin is a brilliant lyricist—there are few better in the world. And he is a really amazing, charming performer.

What I always like to say is that Benjamin is dangerously honest. It’s so comforting when somebody just goes ahead and tells the truth. There’s this great motto in theatre that says, “Tell the truth and don’t be boring.” And those are two things that I feel like Benjamin really subscribes to.

So the idea of being able to figure out: What is it to have lost a father? What does it mean? How does it change your life? ... With somebody unafraid to examine that on their own level, was terrifying and exciting to me.

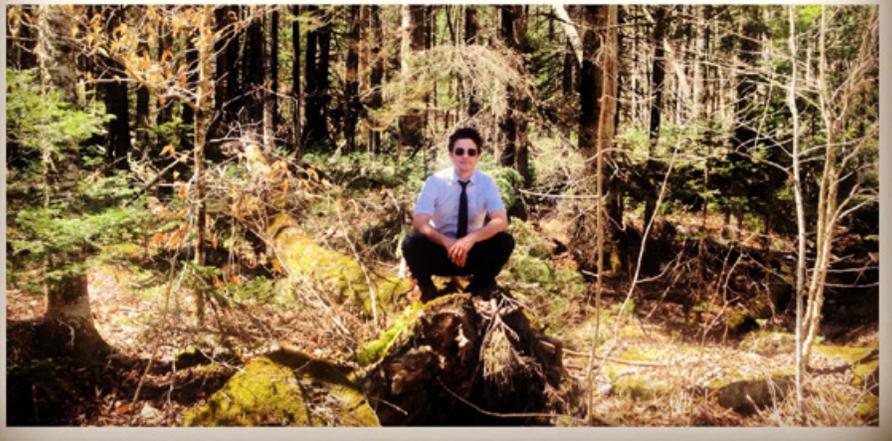
Benjamin, this show started as a collection of autobiographical songs—how did it coalesce into a full musical?

BENJAMIN: When I got invited to the Weston Playhouse in Vermont to continue working on [the show], the artis-

tic director of the Weston said to me, “Benjamin, you should bring a director; you need a new set of eyes and ears.” And so I spoke with a number of different directors, about how they would direct my show. And I asked Sean Daniels, “How would you direct my show?” And he said, “Well let’s be clear, man: you don’t have a show. You have like four songs; you’re probably gonna cut two of them. I would help you build the show that you want to build, from the ground up.”

And Sean and I went to Weston, Vermont on a first “creative date,” and a week later we came away with the start of four new songs, including “Cookie-tin Banjo,” and a song called “Dear Dad,” which came about when I was procrastinating from writing: I would write postcards, and go to the Weston post office and mail them; Sean saw me doing this, and said “Why don’t you write a postcard to your dad...”

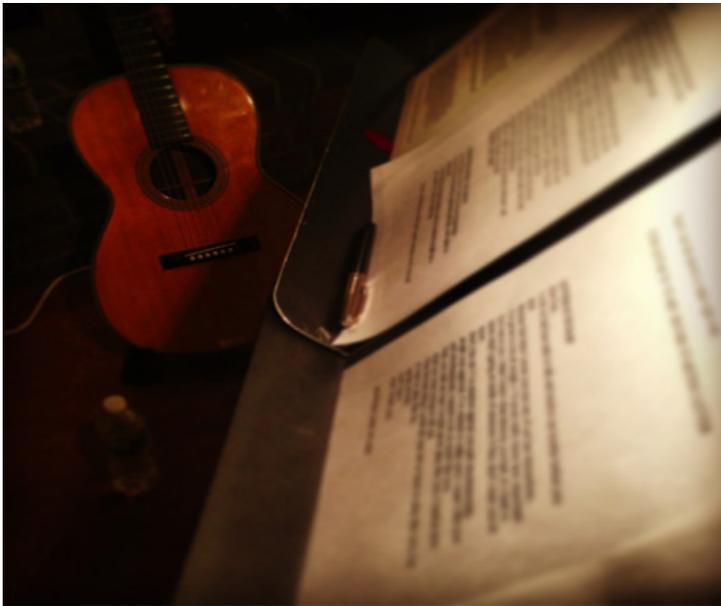
SEAN: I think it’s interesting that a lot of the story happened *during* the making of the show. When we were at the Weston, Benjamin was telling me about this letter he’d written to his father [as a kid], and I suggested that



“Here’s Benjamin in a suit by a tree... and here’s me sweating by a river.”



Writing at Vermont's Weston Playhouse



An early concert of material for *The Lion*

he write a follow-up letter, to let him know how great he was doing now. And just that idea made Ben cry.

So I had to run out and buy bacon, I had to make him breakfast. (It's one of the requirements of what you have to do when you make your playwright cry.) The next day he woke up and he wrote the start of "Dear Dad," which is the penultimate song in the show. So the making of this show created the material of what the show is actually about: coming to terms with the idea that great things can come from awful things. I feel like that's one of the reasons it's so powerful every time it's performed: because that idea, that discovery

of how you do it, is actually baked into the DNA of how the show was created.

BENJAMIN: Also, Sean's a really good dude. We went hiking in the woods... I think I wore a suit and tie, is that right Sean?

SEAN: You did in fact wear a suit and tie, it was amazing.

Seems like reasonable woodland attire to me.

BENJAMIN: Thanks man.

SEAN: The thing is that it was a little ridiculous at the time, but now he looks great in all those photos. It's like, "Here's Benjamin in a suit by a tree... and here's me sweating by a river."

What has surprised or delighted you about how the show has been received?

SEAN: You know there's one part in the show where, regardless of what city we do it in, somebody always passes out. (laughs) It was actually a good friend of mine who was the first one to go. Then in Portland someone passed out in exactly the same spot. So there's something about when we get to certain parts, and Ben saying things that maybe they've never heard out loud, or that they've maybe only heard from their doctor, or they've only read very quietly by bathroom mirror lights—they hear it in public, and it moves them to a point that, you know, they pass out.

Anyway, that's the most powerful response I've ever had to anything.

Benjamin, you've performed the show hundreds of times. With a story as personal this, how do you keep it genuine?

BENJAMIN: A lady came up to me today in the coffee shop where I was sitting, maybe 75 years old. And she told me that she'd seen *The Lion*, and it brought up a memory of hers: that when she was ten years old, she wrote a note to her parents apologizing to them for being a difficult kid; she felt she'd been difficult, and that was why they didn't love her enough. And she told me, as we were sipping coffee, that they never acknowledged her note, and to this day, 65 years later, it continues to sit with her and feel unresolved.

*My show made
this woman feel less alone.
And feeling less alone made her
feel better—even 65 years later.*



Benjamin at work.

And so because the audience is different every night, I get to learn about their stories. Now maybe that's because I talk to somebody after the show. But maybe it's because even as an audience member, they are participating in the story, their energy affects my performance. And so it stays fresh every night.

Is it strange for you to see these characters who are real people in your life—your brothers and parents, your friends—go from being just in your personal sphere to being shared with a huge cross section of humanity?

BENJAMIN: You've left out one other character, who's the strangest of all to theatricalize, and that is the character of Ben.

When Sean and I were building this piece, one thing we made certain to do is always refer to the character as "Ben." And whenever I was talking to the rest of the crew, they would call me "Benjamin"—simply to be able to delineate and to separate this character. Because writing a protagonist who's very, very closely based on me, but still a character that I'm gonna play every day, requires a sense of distancing.

In fact, one day in rehearsal Sean and I had somebody else, an actor, come in and read the role of Ben. Sean and I got to sit in the back of the room and watch this role come to life, and I tried to think of it as I would any other character in any other play: Where is it interesting? Where is it boring?

It was less difficult thinking of these real people as characters, as much as it was thinking of myself as a character. I tried to hold myself up to the same degree of scrutiny that I would anybody else. If I was gonna tell anybody else's secrets (which I do in the show), I had to be able to tell my own secrets twice as honestly.

And now a big part of this story is coming out in the form of a book...

BENJAMIN: Riya Lerner is a teacher at the International Center of Photography, and she photographed me with a medium-format Rolleiflex from the 1970's, once a week, while I was getting chemotherapy. The reason that she and I started this photo project is because my doctor told me that as I got better on the inside, I was going to look worse on the outside.

I found this to be a compelling and unnerving contradiction—and I wanted to create something out of it. The book, *Between Two Spaces*, is a book of these images that Riya took, and excerpts from my journal; and the proceeds from those sales go to benefit the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. You can find it at



Breakfast: one of the requirements when you make your playwright cry.

www.BetweenTwoSpaces.com, and it'll be for sale at performances of *The Lion*.

How has it been for you, seeing that go out into the world?

BENJAMIN: When I perform *The Lion*, I can see people's reactions happening as they see it. The thing about a book is that unless I'm sitting with them as they read it, it's hard to know what their reactions are.

What has been satisfying is to know that I am raising money for a good cause, which is supporting cancer research—and that every time people buy a book, they are supporting that cause too.

MEET THE INSTRUMENTS

In *The Lion*, Benjamin Scheuer uses not one—not two—but six guitars (seven, if you count the understudy) to tell his personal story. Get to know them all:

The **1957 Martin 5-18** is a half-sized guitar.

In *The Lion*, it plays the role of the little guitar that Ben's dad gives him when he's small. Benjamin uses it to play "When We Get Big." When he saw it in the Matt Umanov guitar shop some years ago, he recognized the wood: he knew that it was the same piece of wood—from the same tree—out of which his father's 1957 Martin OO-21 had been built. "It looked like somebody had put my father's guitar in the dryer, and shrunk it," Benjamin says.

In the show, it's tuned a half-step up from standard.



Little Ben's little guitar.



"Dad's Old Guitar."

The **1929 Martin O-18** plays the role of Dad's Old Guitar. It's a beautiful instrument, very light and delicate, quiet and gentle—and the only guitar that starts the show in standard tuning. It's used for the songs "Three Little Cubs," "Weather the Storm," "White Underwear," and "Laugh."



Guitar-builder Michael Millard, Benjamin, and his Froggy Bottom H-12.

The **Les Paul Goldtop Deluxe**, built by Gibson in 1972, represents the young rock-and-roll years in *The Lion*.

Benjamin uses it to play "Saint Rick" and "Lovin' You Will Be Easy." It's a loud guitar. It can growl, cry, scream, purr. It's very leonine. In the show, it's tuned a half-step down from standard.



"It can growl, cry, scream, purr."



The Martin OM-18

The **Martin OM-18** is a modern copy of a 1937 model that Martin built. It's the driest sounding acoustic guitar on stage, and is tuned to DADGAD (a tuning that drops three strings—the highest, second highest, and lowest—down a whole step). It's used to play "A Surprising Phone-call" and "Golden Castle Town".

The **Froggy Bottom H-12**

Benjamin uses two guitars built by the company Froggy Bottom, who are based in Vermont.

His first “Froggy”—a model H12—was a 30th birthday present from his brothers. The guitar’s top is Adirondack spruce; the back and sides are Madagascar rosewood. The hardware is silver-colored steel. On the neck-heel is a painted lion. It starts the show in drop-D tuning (in which just the lowest string is dropped down a whole step).



The Froggy Bottom H-12

Benjamin notes, “Michael Millard is the master luthier who builds these instruments.

Though I’d played his instruments for years, it wasn’t until July 2015 that I met Michael. He came to a gig of mine and introduced himself afterwards. I’ve since visited his workshop. He’s a wonderful man. And he makes really good guitars.”

Benjamin uses it to play “Build A Bridge,” “Invisible Cities,” and “When This Thing’s Over.” He used it to write much of the show, and to record most songs on the forthcoming album “Songs from THE LION.”

The **Froggy Bottom K-14**, Benjamin’s second Froggy Bottom guitar, was built specifically for *The Lion*. Benjamin warms up backstage with it, walks on stage with it, and plays it on the first song of the show, “Cookie-tin Banjo.”



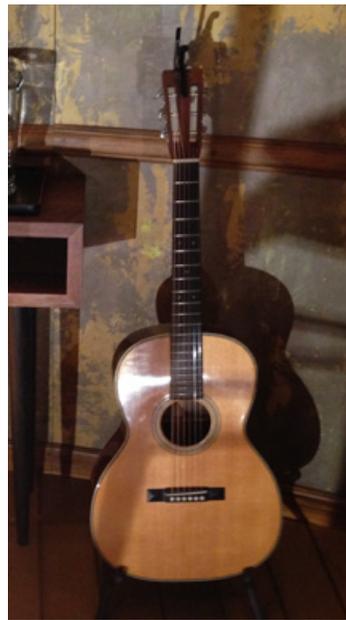
The Froggy Bottom K-14

It’s also used for the songs “Dear Dad” and “The Lion.”

The top is Adirondack spruce; the back and sides are walnut. The hardware is gold-colored. And like its brother the H-12, it has a painting of a lion on the neck heel.

Benjamin says, “My H-12 and his K-14 are siblings. This K-14 has a longer neck and a bigger bum than the H-12: so the H-12 is the boy, and the K-14 is the girl.” The photo shows Benjamin playing at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

The K-14 lives in the tuning CGDGCE.



The Understudy Guitar

The **Martin 000-28** lives against the back wall of the set in *The Lion*. It is the understudy guitar, ready to take the place of any of the other instruments should anything break or go wrong.

Benjamin bought it at Gruhn’s Guitars in Nashville. “The first time I ever performed the song ‘The Lion,’” he recalls, “I used this guitar.”

Hear more from Benjamin at mrt.org/lion, in the “Behind the Scence” tab.



The Froggy Bottom K-14 at Royal Albert Hall in London.

BETWEEN TWO SPACES, BETWEEN TWO ARTISTS

Between Two Spaces is a limited edition artist book by photographer Riya Lerner and singer/songwriter Benjamin Scheuer. Beginning in January 2011 when Scheuer was diagnosed with stage IV Hodgkin's Lymphoma and continuing through February 2012, it includes twenty-seven black and white photographs alongside text selected from Scheuer's journals, an introduction by Scheuer, and an afterword by Lerner.

Riya and Benjamin met for photo sessions once weekly during his struggle with the illness. Some photos depict Benjamin's actual treatment, while others show ongoing life moments. **Riya shared with us some thoughts on her favorite images, which are printed below.**



BATHTUB

"There's one where he's lying in a bathtub. It's very emotional and very striking, but at the same time incredibly calm, and serene... Our photo sessions were at once highly connected to the illness, and at the same time allowed for a reflective space that was separate and protected from everything else that was going on."

"You can take something, whether it's an illness, or emotional hardship, or a breakup, and create something out of that: it doesn't have to be this isolated event that happens to you, but becomes a way for you to gain control of it, and make it into something new."



DANDY PORTRAIT



HOSPITAL GOWN WITH EXPOSED PORT

"I was surprised by the way that photography allows you to form relationships. I take a lot of portraits, but this was the first time I'd worked with someone for over a year, photographing them on a regular basis. Just how much you learn and connect through photographs, I found was a really amazing experience."

"We got to know each other in this very accelerated way. We took all of the very extreme moments right away, when normally when you build a friendship with someone, you learn about them slowly. But it was a very immediate, intense experience where everything was laid out on the table first."



NUDE I



PORT REMOVAL

"We didn't always know what exactly we were going to photograph on that day, but we knew that we'd meet once a week. And I think that structure was, in a way, something for us both to look forward to."

"One of my favorite images is called Two Pairs of Shoes. It's just such a simple image: you don't see Ben's face; he's choosing between these two pairs of shoes that are in front of him, and it seems so simple: at first you don't even notice that they're different... but that kind of option, of making a very specific [choice] like what to wear in a day, becomes something that makes you more confident in the world. It becomes this sort of armor that contains what's happening internally."

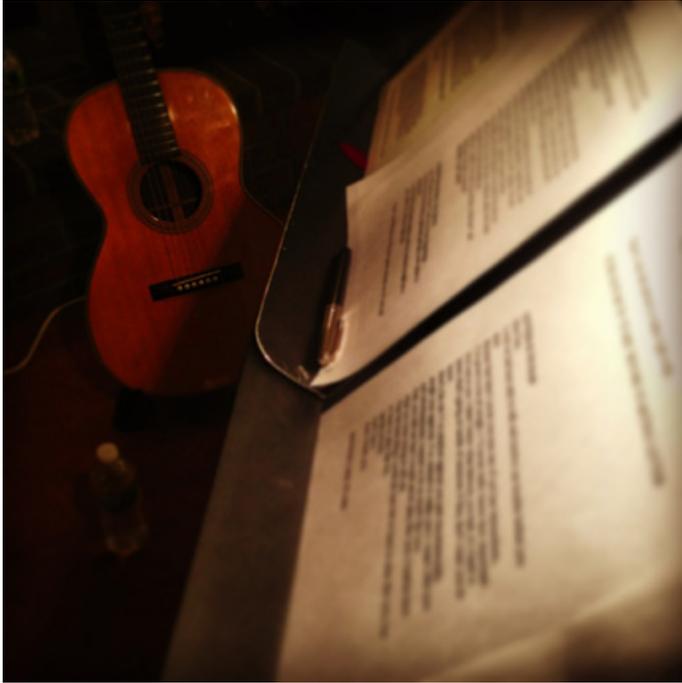


TWO PAIRS OF SHOES

More photographs, along with excerpts from Benjamin Scheuer's journal, can be found in *Between Two Spaces*, available for purchase online at www.BetweenTwoSpaces.com and in the MRT lobby.

50% of all proceeds are donated to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

SCRAPBOOK



AN EARLY CONCERT OF MATERIAL FOR *THE LION*



EDINBURGH PERFORMANCE



WESTON, VERMONT



NOTES FOR *THE LION*

SONGS IN MOTION

A panoply of cardboard-cut animals—elephants, penguins, lions—buzz about, marching, dancing through a brown-box world in kinetic rotation. Drawn in simple lines, their expressions and motion exude tremendous life. In another world, a boy is carried by his larger-than-life father through forests and cities, effortlessly traversing hand-painted skylines and streams.

Radish Pictures is the London-based company that assumed the task of bringing Benjamin Scheuer's music into the world of animation. And the results are beautiful: buoyant, joyous, and touching, the videos for the songs "The Lion" and "Cookie-tin Banjo" get right at the material's essence. If you haven't watched them yet, watch them now.

Peter Baynton, director of Radish Pictures, notes that this music works especially well for an animated project, first and foremost, because it is beautiful. But it takes more than beauty to put *The Lion's* songs in motion.



STORY SONGS: Scheuer's songs for *The Lion* tell stories, and tend to have clear structural moments. It makes the task of fitting narrative simple: "It gives me something to hang the visuals off," Baynton explains, "to know, 'well clearly something's got to happen at this point.'"



ALL ABOUT PERSPECTIVE: The video for "Cookie-tin Banjo" uses heavily skewed perspective and proportions. Baynton reflects: "For me the song is nostalgic, one of hazy childhood memory... When I think back to my childhood, so much gets lost in the fog of distant memory that I'm left with impressions of moments, without much scale or perspective. Dad seemed to me like a literal giant when he picked me up."



FANTASY AND REALITY: The songs are based on real life events, but the videos tend not to go for literal representation. Details tend to lean towards invention rather than realism.

With one notable exception: the cookie-tin banjo is modeled directly from the actual toy instrument given to Scheuer by his father.



PAINT AND PIXELS: For “Cookie-tin Banjo,” all the backgrounds were hand-painted; the characters were then digitally animated and art-worked frame by frame.



ZOOLOGY: “Animals are perfect for animation of course, always have been and always will be. Stick a smiley face on a lion and it’s going to look much cuter than a smiley face on a person.” Baynton chose lions to stand in for Ben and his family, for obvious reasons. The rabbi is an elephant, because it is old and wise with a long memory. And the doctors are penguins because “penguins wear their coats right down to their ankles.”



CARDBOARD WORLD: For “The Lion,” characters and scenes were cut out of actual cardboard, then scanned and animated on a computer. The aim was to create a “puppet theatre” appearance; to add depth, shadows were added digitally.

HAVEN'T SEEN
THE VIDEOS?
WATCH THEM NOW:

THE LION:
<https://vimeo.com/60453523>



COOKIE TIN BANJO:
<https://vimeo.com/99612902>



FLYING SOLO

MRT has presented musicals of all sorts. But there's a special intimacy in a full story sung by one person that we love. MRT's recent solo musicals have included:



*Benjamin Scheuer in **The Lion**. Photo by Matthew Murphy.*

The Lion: Benjamin Scheuer's autobiographical show told by six guitars and one voice comes to MRT to launch the 2015-16 Season after wildly successful runs in New York and London.



Penny Fuller as Virginia Carpolotti. Photo by Meghan Moore.

13 Things About Ed Carpolotti: Audiences were charmed by this delightful production last December. Penny Fuller won an IRNE (Independent Reviewers of New England) Award for her endearing performance.



Miche Braden as Bessie Smith, with musicians Jim Hankins, Aaron Graves, and Anthony E. Nelson, Jr. Photo by Meghan Moore.

The Devil's Music: The Life and Blues of Bessie Smith: This musical biography featuring Miche Braden as the legendary blues singer brought down the house in January 2014.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS IN THE LION

CBGB: Legendary New York music club located at 315 Bowery. Closed since 2006, its former building is on the National Register of Historic Places.

CHALLAH BREAD: Traditional Jewish braided loaf eaten on the Sabbath and other holidays.

CHEMOTHERAPY: Treatment for cancer that uses drugs to stop or slow the growth of cancer cells. It can cause troubling side effects, as many healthy cells that grow and divide quickly (in the manner of cancer cells) are destroyed as well.

GRAND CENTRAL STATION: Major commuter railroad station at 42nd Street and Park Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

JAMES TAYLOR: Five-time Grammy winning singer-songwriter and guitarist, whose hits include “Fire and Rain,” “You’ve Got a Friend,” and “Copperline.”

LYTIC LESIONS: Light areas found in generally dense bone on an x-ray, which suggest that something has destroyed (or replaced) bone matter. Lytic lesions are sometimes, but not always, indicative of cancer.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Ben’s dad lashes out the way he does early in the show—even when he seems to treat Ben’s brothers more gently?
2. What role do you see Julia playing in Ben’s story—is their romance an isolated section of Ben’s experiences, or an integrally woven-in part of his journey?
3. How do Ben’s attempts at communication with his dad evolve through the show? Is there anyone in your own life with whom your communication has evolved with time?
4. What do you think is meant by “I always show my teeth when I am smiling”?
5. Are there moments in the show where Benjamin’s musical choices surprise you?
6. What words would you use to describe Benjamin’s storytelling style? How do you think this style serves the material of the show?
7. “Coming to terms with the idea that great things can come from awful things”—that’s what director Sean Daniels says this show is about. Do you agree? Are there moments where you find it to be especially true? Are there other things you think *The Lion* is about?

THANK YOU

A special thank you to the people who contributed their time, energy, and work to this PlayGuide:

Peter Baynton

Sean Daniels

Riya Lerner

Benjamin Scheuer