

Writing in Restaurants...The Diary of a Musical

Apr 29 2001

Lot to write a diary of how we wrote the musical for the programme. Hope Neil and Chris don't sue for slander.

When it was decided that I'd write a few words about how me, Neil and Chris came to write Closer To Heaven, I trawled my diaries and saw that rather than write about how we developed plot, character and music, I'd written on the whole a list of the restaurants we'd been to. I've put on two stone since we started working on this show. Looking at my diary entries, it isn't any wonder. It's taken us the better part of 5 years to get this far. This isn't because we're lazy, in fact we've only worked together when we've had windows in our diaries. During the time we've been working on the musical the boys have done a run at the Savoy Theatre, brought out a new album (Nightlife), played Wembley, done a world tour, a load of European festivals, and toured Japan. I've done a handful of plays, written three series of a sitcom, and developed a load of other telly and film ideas. If I'm being honest, I think we've worked quite quickly!

We first talked about the possibility of working together at the Coast restaurant in December 95, though it wasn't til Spring 97 that we actually set aside some time to work together. I'd had an idea about a love triangle set in a nightclub, and the boys seemed to like it. In those days we worked at the Boys' country retreat, Childdown, in Surrey. I kept very detailed diaries in those days, though they mostly noted the amusing things their housekeeper had said, and the marvellous meals she'd cooked us. For instance, an entry in early February 97 notes a conversation I had with Sandra:

SANDRA	Is your surname Hardy or Harvey?
ME	Harvey.
SANDRA	I thought so. Are you from Dorset?
ME	No I'm from Liverpool.
SANDRA	Only Harvey's a Dorset name.
ME	Is it? I thought it was Irish.
SANDRA	Are there many Harveys in Liverpool?
ME	No.
SANDRA	That's because they're all in Dorset.

Occasionally the diaries offer some insight into how we wrote the show. For instance:

Feb 13

Neil had a dream about recording a song with David Bowie. When he woke up he wrote it down. The result is a beautiful song called FRIENDLY FIRE. It has inspired a whole new character, a faded rock star who I want to call Billie Tricks. She's a pretentious German woman who was massive in the sixties and seventies. I have a feeling she'll steal the show.

I thought I was incredibly trendy working with the most successful pop duo in British chart history, and I told my diary so..

Feb 18

I'm learning a lot about pop music. I know now what a riff is, and what the Cool Cut Charts is. Today Sandra advised me never to put a tulip in the same vase as a daffodil. "They don't get on."

In those days we spent hours talking through the storyline of the show, and defining the characters. I'd go away and write a scene, while the boys would go to their recording studio and write a song.

Feb 19

Last night we all got pissed in the studio and they wrote the music for two songs, CALL ME OLD FASHIONED and FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. I sang a load of crap to 'Old Fashioned' and they're using some of it for backing vocals. (Rock chick that I am.) Chris went back to London today because Arsenal are playing. Last night before I went to bed I graffitid on a note that Neil had left for Sandra. I wrote "Lots and lots of love from Chris." And loads of kisses. She's made up.

Apr 1

Still working on storyline. Neil and Chris pissed themselves when they read out the sauna scene I've written. Most pleased. Then they read the bedroom scene between Dave and Steve. "Oh it's quite sexy!" said Neil.

A cat is stuck up a tree. Tonight Neil carved the joint and got gravy all over his Issy Miyake shirt.

Apr 2

Cat out of tree. Sandra says she can hear it "in the utility room. Screaming!" She said this in a completely silent house. Today I did a chart of all the main characters and plotted through their journeys for us to look at. Neil thinks the faded rock star isn't working yet. At the moment, Neil is playing some tortuous classical music very loudly in his room. I wish he'd go to sleep.

May 4

Made Neil laugh today on the phone. I read out a bit from Boyz where he was on the Eligible Gay Bachelor's list. I was on top of the "Sorry, he's taken!" list – above Elton John if you please.

Sept 10

Dinner tonight at the Ivy with Neil and Chris. Tony Blair was there, eating with Cherie. As we were leaving, Tony called Neil over for a gab. Afterwards I said "Did you tell them you were writing a musical with me?" to which he said "Yes. They'd never heard of you." That told me.

Sept 15

Neil was fuming this morning when the car picked him up. His German stalker had only just stopped ringing his doorbell, and he thought I was her. He'd tried to push her away, saying "You've been standing out here for three years!" She screamed back, "It's longer than that!" She has been in the papers now, and is blaming Neil for her bad press.

When we arrived Chris requested 2 crumpets. He got 2 muffins and was really pissed off.

As the story took shape, we didn't always see eye to eye..

Sept 16 1997

Chris is very put out that we have decided to kill off Mile End Steve. Neil starts to waiver. "Oh maybe we could just send him to prison." I stick to my guns. Chris wants the play to be feel-good. I point out that one of the characters is a psychotic drug dealer.

I had a full cooked English breakfast today. The Independent has a new layout. Neil says it's "very Canadian."

We watched Carousel. Chris hated it, but kept watching coz he knew You'll Never Walk Alone is in it. This set off against me loving it and singing along to every song. After each number I'd look to Neil for reassurance and he'd say "It's beautiful" or.. "It's their best." Realised that Rogers and Hammerstein wrote both the inspirational songs from Carousel and The Sound Of Music about walking (You'll Never Walk Alone and Climb Every Mountain.)

At the end Chris said "Very good" then headed off to bed. At the door he turned back and said "I still don't see why Mile End Steve has to die." Neil said "It's a fabulous excuse for a song!"

Sept 17

Chris has surrendered over MES' death. ("Coz you two are determined.") He contributes well to today's storyline discussions. He also suggests that if the drugs consignment is smack instead of cocaine, then it would make more sense that MES would feel under threat of being bumped off. Neil and I are delighted. We plough ahead.

Today we watch The Sound of Music. I catch Chris mouthing the lyrics. All adore the Baroness' bitchiness. She is so well written and performed. Also her character can't have a happy ending as she is the only character whose life is not transformed by music! Sandra thinks we are mad to be sitting in on such a lovely day. "Not getting too upset are you?" she asks as she comes in to collect our tea cups.

Finished off the storyline before dinner and cracked open the Perrier Jouet to celebrate. After dinner, read through the storyline together, playing tracks of each song as we came to it, discussing the staging etc. MES doesn't get murdered now, but dies of a heroin overdose – in the arms of Billie Tricks, the faded rock star. Over dinner we discussed titles. I suggested Night Life, which seems to have stuck. Neil admitted that as a child he waited to see Charmian Carr (Leisl from TSOM) at Newcastle Railway Station. I'm green with envy.

In January 1998 I finished the first ever draft of Nightlife. We were unbelievably excited with the results and had lunch at Orso to talk about it. At this stage we were receiving advice on it from Stephen Daldry (at the Sugar Club, I seem to recall.) In August 98 we had a meeting with a certain master of the musical..

Sept 20

During rehearsals for Guiding Star at the National I slip away for a meeting with Trevor Nunn, who is giving us advice on the show. I've now been in a lot of offices at the National, and have to concede that Trevor's is the biggest and has the best view. (Not surprising as he is the boss) He is wearing jeans. My notes include the following:

It's an intriguing play

Be careful with over-use of screens.

The play must stand up on its own without the songs.

Songs must illuminate, not be a pause in, the story.

The idea of Dave, an outsider in the metropolis, is fascinating.

Which are the songs which are the most in character/check their placing

Little Black Dress — we know nothing about her before she sings it. Wasted?

Shortly after that Neil and Chris came to the Press Night of Guiding Star and were very impressed with the director, Gemma Bodinetz. We all met up at Soho House to discuss her take on the show. By November Neil and Chris had met all potential directors and we all agreed that Gemma was the woman for the job. Gemma soon got the designer Es Devlin and the choreographer Peter Darling on board and then in October 99 we had our first of many meetings with the Really Useful Group. (And dinners at Zilli's and Stephen Bull's). By the spring of the next year we were in auditions for the workshop of the musical, which had now been re-christened Closer To Heaven, though the Boys were keen on the title Positive Role Model.

It was only really during the workshop that we first started to see properly what worked and didn't work about the show. It was a very different beast then. There was a lot of dialogue, not all of it good, and I immediately began to see just how much I was going to have to pare the dialogue down. We presented the 'show' to friends and investors in May 2000, following 3 weeks rehearsals.

So often in theatre you are given a load of bullshit. People pretending they liked your work, that sort of thing. Well let me tell you, things were very brutal after the workshop. We each received feedback sheets from all the investors who'd been to see the show, and their judgement was brutal. The show had potential, but needed a lot of work to be put right. The good thing about all this was that there was nothing written down that I hadn't felt myself already.

One big thing about the workshop was how much the audience loved Frances Barber's portrayal of Billie Tricks, who at that point was in a couple of scenes and had one song. Gemma suggested putting her more centre stage, and we thought this was a wonderful idea. We were also brutal about which songs worked and which songs didn't. We changed the name of the dealer from Steve to Lee, we got rid of characters that didn't work. We stripped the show down to the bare essentials, but still the opening wasn't working.

A few years ago, the Boys and I read a book by Mark Steyn called Broadway Babies. He says in that book that any successful musical sets up the world and the story in the first few seconds of the show. I felt we had a lot of story to get across in the opening moment and suggested the Boys write a new song which told everyone's stories individually, but also linked them together. The first night in the story of the show is very important for all the main characters. Neil and Chris went away and wrote My Night. It revolutionised the show. It was almost as if once the style had been set in that song, we'd found a new way to tell the story musically.

I'm incredibly proud by what we've done with this show, and amazed at how much I've learnt. I sincerely hope that audiences like it too. Still, if they don't and it all goes horribly wrong, I could always write a good restaurant guide.

Jonathan Harvey

May 2001