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# Jane Austen put to music

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LENOX — A musical based on Jane Austen's early novel "Sense and Sensibility?" It may seem an impossible dream, but Austen fans already are buzzing on the Internet about the work-in-progress to be performed Saturday at Shakespeare & Company's Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre. Boston-based composer and conductor Neal Hampton, 47, and New York theater veteran Jeffrey Haddow, 61, acknowledge that "Sense and Sensibility: The Musical" represents a daunting challenge.

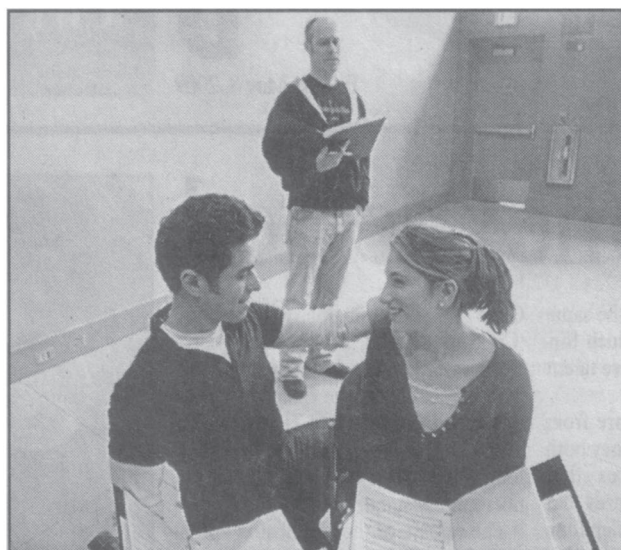
During a conversation near Tanglewood last weekend, they described how the project was hatched after they met at the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater

Workshop in Manhattan, the prestigious incubator of new stagings by composers, lyricists and librettists founded in 1961 by the composer and conductor of musicals and by BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.), the performing-rights organization.

For Hampton, a faculty member at Brandeis University and Wellesley College and conductor of the Brandeis-Wellesley Orchestra, it's his first completed musical, though he composed songs for an adaptation of Dickens' "Chimes" and other projects. Haddow's extensive credits include co-authoring the off-Broadway musical revue "Scrambled Feet" and co-author of the play, "Chekhov in Yalta."

"When we went on to the advanced workshop, Jeffrey had the idea of adapting 'Sense' and he knew me from other projects," Hampton said, "so I was a composer of music he thought would be appropriate."

Asked how he approached the task of adapting Austen's sprawling novel, Haddow replied: "The short answer is very carefully.



Darren Vanden Berge/Berkshire Eagle Staff

Josh Young, left, and Deborah Grausman, right, along with Todd Alan Johnson, background, run through a scene from 'Sense and Sensibility,' a new musical that will be given a staged reading by Berkshire Musical Theater Workshop Saturday at Shakespeare & Company.

"A lot of people know Jane Austen very well, so the challenge is to compress it to the size and shape a musical should be, fitting into a certain time frame and reducing the cast of characters down to a manageable size for the stage."

The readings represent the first production of the new Berkshire Musical Theater Workshop, founded by producer, actor and singer Deborah Grausman, 28, who performs in the key role of Marianne Dashwood.

Hampton first met Grausman through friends and family connections at Tanglewood. He asked her to present several songs at the

BMI workshop.

"I got to know her as a wonderful singer and actor, and as a very enthusiastic collaborator," said Hampton. "We were absolutely delighted that she asked us to present the inaugural work here."

Grausman raised \$13,000 to rent the facilities at Shakespeare & Company and pay the performers, most of whom are covered by Actors Equity contracts.

The director, Sam Scalamoni, has extensive credits on Broadway, in regional theater and on the international touring circuit. Music director and pianist is Amy Lieberman, director of choral activities at the New England Conservatory in Boston.

Haddow described how he and Hampton prepared the lyrics and the music “very organically—we’d be together in the same room, Neal would be fooling around at the piano and I’d be fooling around with the words, and somehow, something would come together that looked like a hook for a song. Then we’ll build on that and sooner or later, it actually grows like a plant, and it’s the absolute best way to write songs, because they don’t sound like one thing is pasted on another.”

“The spark will come from the lyrics or the music at different times,” Hampton added. “None of the 24 songs would be remotely what they are had it not been for the collaboration, so there’s a sense of co-ownership, completely.”

As the composer, Hampton said, the project’s greatest challenge was “trying to find a musical language that evokes the era without being of the era, trying to give it a cogent tone throughout while still giving every song its own character.”

The attempt to be “faithful to the spirit of the novel while making a piece that was effective on the musical stage

involved a lot of simplification of the plot,” Haddow acknowledged.

The staged readings, to be followed by a discussion, offer “an opportunity for us to put new material in,” Haddow said. “We’re able to see what works in rehearsals day-to-day, but once the audience is there, that’s the proof of the pudding. They tell you everything. The main thing for us is that the audience becomes engaged in the story and that they stay engaged.”

“We’ll make decisions very quickly about which things to get rid of, to change, or maybe write a whole new song or new scene to try to make this thing better and better,” said Hampton.

The 200th anniversary of “Sense and Sensibility’s” publication will be celebrated in 2011, and the team has been contacted by the Jane Austen Society of North America. Hampton expressed the hope that Austen admirers “will understand that a musical is a transformative process it all comes out of a love for the book.

“I was very inspired by it and by the possibilities of these wonderful characters singing out their feelings, which they ab-

solutely cannot express in public because of the manners of the society at the time. So, I hope that they will fall in love with the choices we’ve made and come along for the ride with us.”

With a little prompting, the composer and author acknowledge their hope for a Broadway production to help commemorate the anniversary.

The best-case scenario, as envisioned by Grausman, would be a staged reading, with inevitable revisions, for potential backers in New York later this year.

Whatever the project’s destiny, Hampton and Haddow describe their collaboration as “very smooth sailing,” free of major creative differences.

“We’re both just interested in telling the most compelling story possible and making it successful,” said Hampton. “After working with each other, we’ve learned to trust each other’s judgment.”

“You never know what can happen,” he went on. “For me, the pleasure is in the process, and it sounds a bit high-minded it’s the work that’s fulfilling. There are a lot of places where a show can have

a life.”

Haddow concurred. “It’s all about the journey, not the destination,” he said, quoting a familiar saying. (c) 2009 The Berkshire Eagle. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.