

education

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Everyday Rapture Lecture Series

On April 24th, 2010, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department, interviewed co-author Dick Scanlan about *Everyday Rapture*. A question & answer session with the audience followed.

Ted Sod: Today we have as our guest Dick Scanlan, co-author of *Everyday Rapture*. Dick, I thought we would start with a bit of background on you. Where are you from originally?

Dick Scanlan: I'm from the Washington D.C. suburbs. I was raised on the Maryland side of Washington. For those of you who know the history of that area, Washington was originally half Virginia and half Maryland and then Virginia took their part back.

Ted Sod: Can you tell us a bit about your education? Did you start as an actor?

Dick Scanlan: I did. From a very young age, I wanted to be an actor. I studied acting at Carnegie Mellon University. I moved to New York when I was twenty and pursued an acting career and had some success until I realized I wasn't as talented as I thought I should be or as talented as the people I admired. I had always excelled at writing, but never really thought of it as anything because when something comes naturally to you, you often take it for granted. Then, in my late twenties, I began writing professionally.

Ted Sod: You've written a novel. Do you want to talk about it?

Dick Scanlan: Sure. Throughout my twenties, I had a partner. I was an actor; I was working some. My partner, who was older than I was, was always telling me that I should be a writer. I always interpreted it as a kind of don't-be-an-actor thing. And then when I was twenty-eight, he passed away from AIDS. I think that was a moment when I realized that life is finite. I realized that my life, like all our lives, is finite. I'm a voracious reader and I read primarily fiction, so I started writing short stories. I enrolled in a workshop at Columbia University and after the first class, the teacher, Ellen Currie, who is a fabulous fiction writer, asked me to wait. She said to me, "Do you have an agent?" And I said, "All I've ever written is the one short story that you've just read." She said, "Well, send it to my agent." And I did and that agent took me on. We sold that story, and I began writing more short stories and publishing quarterlies and some commercial magazines. Eventually, we put them together. It's really a collection of short stories, but for marketing reasons, novels sell a lot more than short story collections. So, if your short stories are linked, they'll often call them a novel to boost sales. That was published in 1995, and it was called *Does Freddy Dance*.

Ted Sod: You've also written for a number of periodicals and magazines.

Dick Scanlan: Yes, I did a lot of journalism along the way. I'd write anything for money at the time. I was just trying to support myself. A friend of mine from the theater had left the theater to become a big editor at *Playboy*. I ran into him on the street. I was writing fiction at the time, and he said, "Send me some article ideas." You know the old joke of "I subscribe to *Playboy* for the articles," he was the guy who edited those articles. So I sent him some article ideas and he bought them. *Playboy* at the time was the highest paying commercial magazine in the business, so to have that as my first clip was a great, weighty way to then start submitting story ideas to *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*. A few years later, I was hired to edit the Tony Award edition of *Playbill*. I did this for a few years, and at that point, I was writing for *Playboy* so frequently that I would get confused and say I was editing the Tony Award edition of *Playboy*. And people would be very confused.

Ted Sod: I'd like to talk about a story I read about you, which is exceptionally inspiring. Many of you may know Dick's work as the co-librettist and lyricist of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, which is a wonderful musical which came out in 2002. You started by trying to get the rights from Richard Morris.

Dick Scanlan: *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is a movie that came out in 1967. I had always had this idea of adapting *Thoroughly Modern Millie* for the stage, and I didn't feel that I had another novel in me right away. I was very naïve, actually, and I thought, "I'll adapt *Thoroughly Modern Millie* for the stage. That'll take three or four months." It really ended up taking five or six years. You don't know what something's going to take until you get started. The first thing I did was a title search where you find out who controls the rights to the property that you're trying to adapt. It came back that the stage rights, very atypically, were held and controlled by the man who had written the screenplay. The reason that's such a big deal is that a human being is, theoretically, easier to deal with than a movie company because you can talk to them and they're not worried about losing their job. They're free to make whatever decision is right for them. So they had Richard Morris' address and phone number as of the date that he had registered the screenplay in 1964—and this was in 1993 or 1994. So I had this phone number and no idea if this guy was still living or if he'd moved in the past thirty years. I figured out the little pitch I was going to do. I dialed the number, and someone answered the phone who sounded like an elderly guy. I said, "Is Richard Morris there?" and he said, "Speaking." I gave a three minute speech on why I wanted to adapt *Thoroughly Modern Millie* for the stage and why I was the right person to do it. He said, "Absolutely not," and he slammed the phone down on me. For the next two years or so, every time he'd slam the phone down on me, I'd think, "Well, that's that." Then I'd wake up the next day and think, "But it's such a good idea." So I had my lawyer call his lawyer, my agent call him. I'd call him, and it got to the point where I would say, "This is Dick Scanlan," and he would just hang up. On one of those hang ups, he screamed into the phone, "I'm already adapting it for Broadway." So I knew what his issue was, that he was doing it himself. But I also figured if thirty years had passed since the movie had come out and he hadn't yet completed that adaptation, perhaps he wasn't being very realistic. Finally I lied. I wrote him a letter, telling him that I was coming to Los Angeles on business—I just didn't tell him he was the business—and that I would love to come meet with him to be a sounding board to hear about how his adaptation was going. He wrote me a very chilly letter in response saying, "Seeing as you're going to be here anyway, I suppose if you wanted to come to my house on such and such a date, it's fine." I did. I don't know if you know, but in Los Angeles in The

Valley, the street numbers are painted on the curbs. It was one of those windy streets off Mulholland Drive where if another car's coming, you have to pull all the way over. I could see I was getting near Richard's house by the street numbers, and I pulled over for a car that was passing and said out loud in the car to my imaginary friend, "If this meeting goes well, it will change my life." (And I don't tend to think this way—I tend to think very much about the next task at hand.) I went into his house at noon and left at six o'clock that night. We were just sort of instant soul mates and best friends. We began working on it together, and six months later he revealed to me that right before he received my letter, he'd been diagnosed with cancer. The reason he changed his mind was because he thought if nothing else, I was persistent. He had no idea if I was talented or if he'd like me or my sensibility. But it ended up that we were very compatible aesthetically. We worked together for about a year and a half before he passed away. I made a death bed promise that I would get the show produced about two hours before he passed. I'm here to tell you, don't ever make a death bed promise because they're very stressful. And I thought, "Oh God, now I really have to do it." So I was very happy on opening night that whatever was going to happen with the show, I had fulfilled that promise. He gave me a huge opportunity, and he was just one of the great human beings.

Ted Sod: The part that really intrigued me was that you were both ill at the same time.

Dick Scanlan: That's exactly right. I was infected with HIV in 1983 by the partner who then died in the late 1980s. I was then diagnosed with what they used to call "Full Blown AIDS." I've never liked the term because it suggests that there's such a thing as "Half Baked AIDS." But I was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994, which is around the time Richard and I started working together. I told you Richard was diagnosed with cancer. And 1994 / 1995 was when my health was really beginning to go way down, and Richard's was going way down. So I would go out there because even though I was very ill, I was very mobile. I was younger, and I'm just sort of portable by nature. But invariably, one of us would end up in the emergency room. Much of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was written on legal pads in an emergency room in, I think, Tarzana. It seemed very normal to us. We'd be sitting there, one of us on oxygen, trying to think of a funny line for Millie Dillmount to say. Then Richard passed and later in 1995, a drug came out that sort of overnight turned my health around.

Ted Sod: At this point did you know Jeanine Tesori?

Dick Scanlan: No. Michael Mayer and I have been best friends since 1978. We met in 1976. It took us two years to take to each other, but once we did we've been friends ever since. Michael was at that place in his career where he was beginning to zoom up. I had said maybe this could be something he could do, but in the abstract. Michael came aboard officially in 1996. Initially, the idea for *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was that we would use existing music, and I just kept changing the lyrics to make them more germane to the story. I don't know if you know *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, but there's a Gilbert and Sullivan song that's used as a speed test in the play. It's a dictation of a business letter, and every one of those lyrics is mine. Michael said, "This is ridiculous. At this point, you're writing lyrics." I said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just writing lines that rhyme in scan and tell the story." And he said, "I think that's what lyrics are." So he suggested that we have a music director who could also compose. Around that time, Jeanine Tesori was opening *Violet*, which I saw and loved very much. It was a

beautiful folk chamber musical they did at Playwrights Horizons. She was looking to do something big and brassy, so *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was exactly the kind of thing she was looking for. That's how we came to partner on Millie.

Ted Sod: Many of you know Michael Mayer's work as a director not only from today's show but because he's had a long relationship with the Roundabout. He directed *A View from the Bridge* here, the production with Anthony LaPaglia, and *Sideman*. Let's talk about today. How did you meet Sherie?

Dick Scanlan: I first met Sherie when she and her husband, Kurt Deutsch, formed Sh-K-Boom records. "Sh" is Sherie. "K" is Kurt. And then "Boom." At the time, Kurt was an actor and Sherie, as you saw today, is a stunningly gifted actress. They both auditioned for *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. At the time, she was already somewhat committed to *Aida*, which was on its way to Broadway. I remember I wrote, "Star quality," in my notes. She wasn't really right for the roles in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and she was already sort of taken by *Aida*. About a year later, her husband Kurt called me. The first CD they released was one of Sherie's called *Sherie Rene...Men I've Had*. It was songs written by composers she had worked with: Pete Townshend, Randy Newman, Kander and Ebb, Elton John, and Jonathan Larson. Kurt said to me, "We're looking for someone to write the liner notes for this CD and someone suggested you do it." I told you I'd write anything for money, and that included liner notes. He described the album and said they'd given the songs very pop treatments. I said, "I'm a huge admirer of your wife, but I'm the wrong person for this. I really know nothing about pop music. It's not my sensibility. I wouldn't have anything intelligent to say, and I respect her too much to not do her justice, so thanks, but no thanks." He hung up and then called me back about three hours later, and said, "Would you just listen to it if I drop off the tape." I said, "Sure." He did, and I listened to it and thought it was absolutely fantastic. I still thought I was the wrong person. I didn't feel like I had the right vocabulary to intelligently or effectively write about this repertoire. So I said to him, "It's sensational. I love it. I'm the wrong guy." And he called back the next day. He said, "I spoke with Sherie. She doesn't want someone to write about the music. She's got a weird idea and would you just meet with her and talk about her weird idea?" I like weird ideas, so I said, "Sure." We met in Sherie's dressing room at *Aida*. She said to me, "What I want to do is write fictional vignettes about my relationships with each of these composers that suggest that the relationship was sexual. But I don't want it to be vulgar, and I want the essence of the sexual connection we're talking about to be the essence of what my relationship with these people actually was." That made complete sense to me. That I could do. So we collaborated on those, and while we were working on them, somebody called Sherie and asked if she would perform at a benefit for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. She said to me, "I really hate performing outside of a show because I'm singing a song and I don't know who I'm singing to. I don't know why I'm singing. And the audience doesn't know either. I get very self-conscious and I don't know how to do it." I said, "Why don't we just write something for you to say?" We were creating this persona for the liner notes of somebody who has a much bigger ego and much less insight than the real Sherie Rene Scott has. Why don't we take that persona and have her say something that will contextualize the song, so you can feel comfortable. She asked what we'd talk about and I said, "I don't know, but I'm really sick of going to AIDS benefits where the word "AIDS" is never mentioned. In the 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS benefits were very tender and emotional and cathartic. Then when Protease Inhibitors came out, they became like kids'

birthday parties. No one would mention the fact that we were still talking about a disease that's decimating the continent of Africa as we speak. I said I was kind of tired of it. And she said, "I was raised half Mennonite and my cousin Jerome was one hundred percent Mennonite. He was older than I was and he introduced me to the idea that there was such a thing as Broadway, and he died of AIDS." And I said that was what we'd write about. Nothing we wrote that day is contained in this show. It was as very rudimentary attempt to do what we're doing now. It went over like gangbusters. It was at the New Amsterdam Theatre. I was in the front row of the mezzanine. She was near the end of the bill. It was person after person—Idina Menzel, Adam Pascal—who would come out and sing and say absolutely nothing. I was beginning to panic that it was going to seem really weird when Sherie started to speak. I wondered how to get word to her that she should just sing the song. But then I was afraid that would undermine her confidence. She was backstage, listening on the monitor thinking, "This is a bad idea. I shouldn't do this, but how do I get word to Dick?" But she ended up doing it, and it absolutely brought the house down. Afterward, we both thought it would be a really interesting way to think of an evening where we're writing about her life, but changing the details of it. We're creating a version of her that's very heightened. When we talk about the character of Sherie, Sherie always refers to the character as her. And we all know we're talking about the character in the show who's really a separate entity to us from the woman we're working with.

Ted Sod: There was an opportunity for you to do something down at the Gay and Lesbian Center on 13th Street. If I've got this correctly, the two of you bunkered down at the recording studio she and her husband have. Tell us a little bit about what happened there.

Dick Scanlan: After the benefit at the New Amsterdam, we had this idea to do an evening much like the three minutes she'd done at the benefit. The problem was we were both busy. I knew that this kind of evening was the kind of thing that's either really magical or deadly and tedious. It's such a fine line to keep it about the person, but about something larger that an audience can relate to. So I knew we needed to spend a lot of time together to create a unified voice and discover where our world views were unified. I wanted to make sure we were looking out the same window at the same patch of land. We didn't have the copious amount of time that that took, so we would do five minutes here, three minutes there. Then on Labor Day around 2006, Sherie was starring in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* on Broadway. That show closed rather precipitously. I think it was the same week that I got a call from someone who said, "I know you and Sherie Scott are trying to do a show together, and I'm producing a series of benefits at the Gay and Lesbian Center. Would you do it for us?" It's a pretty safe place to try something out. We started meeting four days a week at a rehearsal studio she and her husband had as part of their record company and talking about ideas. We really weren't making any progress at all. We had nothing on the page. The music director was in kind of a panic about it because there was nothing to play. John Kander came by one day about three weeks before we were supposed to do it and asked what we were working on. We didn't have an answer because we had no material. When John left, I suggested that that was alarming and said, "It seems to me like you've got so much ambivalence about doing something like this because you were raised half Mennonite, and there's this huge part of you that's telling you your desire to be self-expressive and celebrated for it is somehow wrong. By honoring your spirit, you're going to lose your soul. You've got to get over that or we're never going to be able to write anything." And she basically said, "I don't know how to get over it. It's at the core." And I said sort of off-handedly that we

just needed to make the show about that. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but once we had the large idea we were anchoring the evening on, we wrote the first draft of this, which contained large chunks of what you saw today. We wrote it very quickly. I had no idea what it was or where it belonged until the night at the Gay and Lesbian Center. It was crystal clear to me that it was a small Broadway musical. We had no idea how we'd get it there, but I'm very happy and so grateful to the Roundabout because we're here now. And we wouldn't be on Broadway without them.

Ted Sod: Talk to me a little about your process with Sherie. Would she improvise? Would you say, "Let's do a bit about the cousin?"

Dick Scanlan: The short answer is yes. They always joke in the company that I'm Sherie's understudy because I can do every line and move. She'd improvise. I'd improvise. Sometimes I'd go away and write something. She'd read it and say, "That doesn't feel right." She'd go away and write something, and I'd say, "I love this part." A lot of it, I'd say eighty percent, was built in a room together. There was less going off on our own, but there was that as well. Each section, and each section of each section, demanded different ways of working. For example, the opening with the rabbi and the piece of paper came about because we were rehearsing one day and she was coming from acupuncture and said, "At the end of the session today, Randall had me look at a book and there was a page with these sayings. Today's saying was, 'Always carry two pieces of paper: one that says, 'I am a speck of dust' and another that says, 'The world was created for me.'" I thought that was beautiful. We could do something with that. And that was done in a room almost improvisationally. Some of the more narrative sections were written more traditionally at a computer, trying to compose and craft stories. So really it was done every which way imaginable. It was really just the two of us. I think we still marvel when we show up at the theater that there are other people here. I don't have to set up all the magic tricks anymore. It was very Judy and Micky.

Ted Sod: I want to ask you about the backup singers who are fantastic and somewhat Midleresque. And Eamon's character. Can you tell us about how you came together?

Dick Scanlan: Let's start with the Mennonettes. That was an idea of Sherie's. She wanted backup singers, and initially I was resistant to it. I thought it was her ambivalence speaking. I thought it was the part of her that doesn't think she should be alone on stage. I didn't trust the impulse. I asked her if it was about her not wanting to stand center stage and claim that space she deserved. She insisted that she just had this strong intuitive feeling and said, "All I know is that each of them has to be a singer who could easily command the stage on her own. I want three great female singers out there because it's rarely done. Then we can really wail." I couldn't really get my mind around it until I thought of the name "Mennonettes." We had auditions and auditioned all kinds of women. Lindsay, who's usually stage right of Sherie, was the very first person to audition. She gave one of the most brilliant auditions I've ever seen. She sang "Blues in the Night." It was shocking, and it's very hard when the first person is that good because you can't even hear the next fifteen people. Initially, we thought we'd use the Mennonettes in two or three places, and Sherie had a strong feeling that we would just keep finding places to use them. She was absolutely right. The Eamon character, broadwayislove09@earthlink.net, is based on a true story. Sherie told me that story anecdotally

one day, and I was obsessed with it. I thought it was weird and funny and somehow belonged in this play. She showed me e-mails from him. I think initially Sherie's impulse and hope was that we would show the video of the actual guy. (He's since taken it off YouTube. He became sort of famous for these things.) And Sherie would dissect it as she spoke. The problem with that is there are a lot of legal issues with the use of the kid's image and the cast recording. You end up paying musicians a lot of money. Also, I just didn't think it sounded theatrical. I'd always rather have a human being on stage than a filmed image. Initially, we did this in workshops with a stunningly gifted comic actor in his early thirties named Tyler Maynard. But watching it, I thought it had to be an actual young man because then the shift in power between the two of them becomes so much more striking and strange. We auditioned. Eamon came in and blew us all away. We cast him about a year and a half ago because we did this show last year at Second Stage on the other side of 8th Avenue. I think Eamon was terrified that if his voice changed, we wouldn't use him. I could tell it was changing, and he'd try to talk as high as he could. We had a recording session a few months ago, and he came to say hello. His voice had completely changed, and we had him sing his part. The moment we heard him, we thought it had nothing to do with what key he sings the song in. He's so gifted. He really gets it and he's such an old soul. There's something so pure about that. Even as the character, he's sort of maddening and yet there's something so unbelievably winning about him. We're thrilled that he's still a part of this family.

Ted Sod: As a younger child, he was in our revival of *Assassins*. Before we let the audience ask some questions, I'd like to talk to you about the song list and the arrangements, which the recently awarded Pulitzer Prize winner, Tom Kitt did. How did the song list come about?

Dick Scanlan: Almost without exception, the songs came completely out of the story. I think the only exception to that is the song Sherie sings after the story about the four leaf clover called "Why" by David Byrne. That was a song Sherie played me while we were working and I thought, "I don't know where that song goes in this play, but it has to go in this play because it's so spectacularly well-written." But we would always focus on the story we were trying to tell and a song would suggest itself. It would just pop into our heads. One other exception was the last song, "Up the Ladder to the Roof." I've been wanting Sherie to sing it for years and it was originally not something she wanted to do. There was another song we ended the show with that was very sad. We all felt "Up the Ladder" would be a happier way to go. Sherie agreed to give it a try, but the problem was that Tom Kitt was in the delivery room because his wife was having a baby. Michael Mayer and Sherie said, "We can't call Tom in the delivery room," and I said, "Give me the phone." It had to go in that night because the critics were coming the next night. I said, "I'm calling to either ask you to do it or let us hire someone else to do it." And he said it was turning out to be a long delivery, so he arranged and orchestrated that song while his wife Rita was in labor with little baby Julia. I always think of that as Julia's arrangement. It's an inspired arrangement by Tom. If any of you know the original Supremes recording, which is quite lovely, what Tom has done with that song is startling and unbelievably artful and thrilling.

Ted Sod: I could go on asking Dick a bunch of questions, but I want to give you an opportunity. One of the things that I love, by the way, is the contrast of Judy/Jesus and the two Freds. They are ingenious contrasts between icons. The two Freds, especially, is really remarkable.

Dick Scanlan: I have to tell you that the high point of opening night last year was meeting Fred Rogers' widow, who's been a huge champion of this show. They're very protective of his work as they ought to be and very rarely grant rights to Fred's songs. We're so grateful to them. They really believe in this show. We had Fred Phelps and we had Fred Rogers in the play. We were always unsure what the last moments of the play would be until I stumbled across that Fred Phelps had been at Fred Rogers' memorial. We had no idea. First, why? It seems Phelps was enraged that Mr. Rogers stood for tolerance, and Fred Phelps thinks tolerance is sinful. But then we thought that had to be the final moment; that's how it all comes together for this woman and this character.

Ted Sod: We're going to allow you now to ask some questions. Who would like to start?

Audience Member #1: I wanted to know what Sherie's relationship with the Mennonite community and her family is like now.

Dick Scanlan: As I indicated earlier, the play is autobiographical, but it's far from autobiography, which we're candid about. There are many things in the play that are made up. Some of the more strange things, like the fact that Sherie's first public performance was singing "Get Happy" at Menninger, are actually true. That's the first time she sang in public when she was a child.

Ted Sod: Was Elizabeth Taylor actually there?

Dick Scanlan: No. Sherie is half Mennonite. Her mother was raised in a Mennonite community and left the religion when she married Sherie's father. Sherie's connection with the Mennonite community was visiting her relatives, usually on vacations. In terms of actual details in Sherie's life, the Mennonite community connection is probably less than what we say in the show. But, in terms of the impact of the message she got, which was: never stand out, never call attention to yourself, there's an enormous amount of truth to that. We live in a capitalist country where we're supposed to be number one, but we also have a Judeo-Christian ethic that is we are our brother's keeper. So it's sometimes very hard to reconcile the messages we're getting. Sherie's version of those messages is specific, and the message of humility is filtered through a Mennonite sensibility. I had not visited a Mennonite community in preparing for this show, but I did a fair amount of research online and reading. Mennonites have sometimes seen the show, and they say afterward how right we got it. I'm so thrilled because I didn't go visit to prepare.

Audience Member #1: What was the word again in the show?

Dick Scanlan: Rumspringa. Rumspringa is really more of an Amish thing than a Mennonite thing although it does exist in the Mennonite community. Not every Amish teen gets Rumspringa, but it is the German word for running around. It's a year when you can go a little crazy, which I guess means wear buttons. I don't think they mean become a crystal meth addict. I think it means you're allowed to watch television once because they want you to experience the real world so you can understand the kind of purity of the life of the Amish order and the benefits of that.

Ted Sod: There are some remarkable documentaries about Rumspringa. In fact, there's a documentary entitled *The Devil's Playground* that I believe won an Emmy. There are some amazing opportunities to learn more about it because it is a rather remarkable rite of passage in that community. Most of the children are expected to come back into the fold, of course.

Dick Scanlan: They don't hope that you end up on Broadway doing a solo show about your extended Rumspringa.

Audience Member #2: I'm a big fan of "The Girl in 14G." I was wondering what inspired you to write it.

Dick Scanlan: "The Girl in 14G" is a song I was commissioned to write with Jeanine Tesori for Kristin Chenoweth's first CD called *Let Yourself Go*. It's a story song about a very mousy woman who gets a new apartment. Above her lives an operatic soprano and below her lives a jazz singer. Kristin sings all three voices and it comes together at the end. It's become one of her signature pieces. Sony Records asked Tesori and I to write something that would show off Kristin Chenoweth's versatile vocal abilities, which is an operatic soprano, an incredible Broadway belt, and this wonderful comic sensibility. We didn't want it to be what we think of as a cabaret song, which would be very declamatory where someone would come out and sing. We wanted it to be more interesting than that, so we came up with the idea for this story. Jeanine Tesori and I spent seven days meeting at nine in the morning and separating at midnight before we realized what the song should be. Once we knew what it should be, we wrote it very quickly. I remember that the first time Kristin presented it to Peter Gelb, who is now the head of the Metropolitan Opera and was then at Sony, and he said, "Yes, let's put it on the CD." It never occurred to us that that song would have a life outside the CD. It's been very gratifying to see that it's out there.

Audience Member #3: I saw *Sideman* a couple of years ago. I was wondering what the connection between *Sideman* and today is.

Dick Scanlan: The director of this show directed *Sideman*, which is a gorgeous play that received a gorgeous production here at the Roundabout. Michael's direction was pretty spectacular. It launched Edie Falco's career.

Audience Member #3: I have to say, my son did the costumes for *Sideman* and for this.

Dick Scanlan: You're Tom Broecker's mother. I love your son. This is the costume designer's mother; that's a big deal.

Ted Sod: You should tell them that your son also does the costumes for *30 Rock*.

Audience Member #3: And *Saturday Night Live*.

Dick Scanlan: He's a great guy. We love working with him.

Ted Sod: He did the clothes for *The Understudy* this year too.

Dick Scanlan: It might seem counterintuitive, but costuming a show like this in many ways is much harder than costuming a period drama. We wanted Sherie to look like she's wearing something she'd wear, but it has to also have something magical about it. It has to stand up to eight times a week. It's got to have something else about it. It's a very hard thing doing costumes in contemporary garb. To do a Restoration comedy costs a lot more for the producer, but it's easier for the designer because we'll all accept whatever we see. We don't know that costume vocabulary. Everyday clothes can be harder to pull off.

Ted Sod: Can you tell me a little bit about putting this together so quickly? Was that nerve-racking? How did that work? Michael was directing two shows simultaneously.

Dick Scanlan: Michael was directing *American Idiot*, which he's not only the director of, but he's also the co-book writer, and it's a huge show. It's an epic rock opera, so his duties there were extensive. We've basically had a month. We started talking to Todd Haimes a month ago today, really, and here we are just a few days from opening. It really is like having sex on Sunday, a sonogram Monday, and a baby Tuesday. I've never been pregnant, but I think that would have advantages. It's the same thing here. There've been huge advantages doing it this quickly. There's been no time for anybody to do anything other than their job and do it unbelievably well. This show is so special to me and Sherie, and it nearly didn't happen after its Off-Broadway run, as acclaimed as that was because it's a very odd, quirky little show. We had gotten these gorgeous reviews and thought this other thing was going to happen. Then it didn't, and we worked really hard to put it away, but there was some grief around that. So when this call came through, the miraculous nature of this opportunity completely trumped any anxiety or apprehension we might have had about doing it this quickly. It's only been a month, but it's been kind of a glorious month. I hope I'm speaking for the crew. Everybody seems to have this feeling of we'd forgotten how quickly you can do things when you have to. You don't have time to make bad choices or second guess yourself. You just get it done. It's interesting that when the call came through, almost all of the designers were on *American Idiot*. They were very nervous. They didn't want the show to look bad or sound bad. They love the show and have pride in their work. I was trying to weigh their apprehension with my own feeling that this was such an opportunity. My partner, who's cautious by nature, basically said to me what Sherie was saying: this is a miracle and you'd be crazy to say no to a miracle. Just do it and figure out how to make it work. That's what we've done, and it's been glorious. There've really been very few problems. The biggest challenge (and it's so mundane) is that in the theater we were in before, there was no follow spot, so wherever Sherie moved, there had to be a light cue to pick her up. She had to walk at a very specific tempo to very specific places. We had to get used to her being free. On this stage, she can go anywhere because there's somebody following her with a light. If she wants to walk more quickly one night, she can do that. It was just about loosening that up. That was the biggest challenge we had, and it's a pretty small big challenge.

Audience Member #4: Has Fred Phelps and company made any comment about this?

Dick Scanlan: They haven't, and the marketer in me keeps thinking, "How can we get them here to protest?" They protest things far less controversial than our show. I'm almost offended that they haven't shown up. Sherie did, indeed, grow up around the corner from the Phelps and

did go to school with his daughter, so aspects of that are true. A lot of his children are lawyers. It's one of the ways he's been able to do what he does. Of his sixteen or nineteen kids, a few have left the fold, but a lot of the ones who have stayed are lawyers and spend all their time fighting on free speech grounds to be able to do what they do. They're using a traditionally liberal ideology to protect and defend what they call right-wing, even though that's not true actually. It's something else. Really just hate is what they do.

Ted Sod: It's always been very clear to me that some more compassionate people—and I've always thought that compassion was the highest form of intelligence—can actually understand their paradigm, and they absolutely refuse to understand another paradigm. You make that point in the show. It's a really brilliant point. When you're unable to understand other paradigms, you're so locked into something unfortunate. You cannot appreciate everything around you. You did it in such a wonderful way and it didn't feel like you were preaching to the converted. You really started to put your finger on why these people have to do what they do. They're just not capable of taking in the rest of us and appreciating us. I love that trajectory.

Audience Member #5: I think it's brilliant that you focused on Sherie's question about her own spiritual issues.

Dick Scanlan: I really appreciate that. At the time, I didn't really recognize the brilliance in it. I was a desperate man, trying to figure out what she was going to say on stage in twenty one days. One of the things she and I would talk about is the idea that the more personal and specific you make your story, the more universal it will be. The more general and impersonal you make it, the less people will be able to connect to it in their own way. It's a paradox and for her that was a scary truth. I think initially it wasn't a truth. I think she took it on faith because I was so adamant about it. The more you speak authentically about your own experience, the more a complete stranger somehow has a way of looking at his or her own experience.

Ted Sod: Carrie Fisher talked about her life this season. And of course Sondheim did a similar thing. So we've had quite a number of shows this year that deal with this personal journey that the rest of us sort of hook into on different levels.

Audience Member #6: I would love to know how old the young man is.

Dick Scanlan: I think he's sixteen now. Because he's done six Broadway shows at sixteen and his goal is to have done seven at seventeen. Of course, he did *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* twice, but he counts it as two.

Audience Member #7: I was wondering about the magic tricks. What was the genesis of that, and have there been any mishaps?

Dick Scanlan: Oh, sure. It's live theater. One of the ways I describe Sherie is as a post-modern vaudevillian. She's got this age-old understanding of how to perform and what her relationship to space and people in space is. I know she has a very contemporary sensibility. And the reason I bring that up is because like a great vaudevillian, Sherie rehearses and rehearses. She doesn't take breaks. If there's a ten minute break, she'll be eating and rehearsing. She doesn't do phone

calls or go to the bathroom. She just works and works and works. I'm built the same way. That's how you do magic tricks well. It's constant repetition, almost like ballet with your hands. And of course we have a magic consultant. There have been mishaps. Actually, with the Perrier trick, which is the first one she does, when we were first working on it, it was hard. I called the magic shop, which is a stoned fifteen-year-old in a garage. This is before we had the Mennonettes, and I said we'd had some problems and what should we do when the trick doesn't work? He said, "You give it to your assistant and go on to your next trick." And I said, "Well, her next trick is a monologue and there is no assistant," and he basically said, "You're screwed man." Sherie's always been very interested in magic. Aspects of that section have truth to them, including the trip to the magic store. As we got into it and began to integrate the idea of the character choosing to have an abortion, I became very interested in the idea of a scarf that goes away. There's something that's there and then there isn't anymore. And that suggested to us that there should be some magic integrated. So we called up a magician someone recommended. We tried other tricks along the way. When she does too many tricks, it doesn't work. If they look too store-bought, it doesn't work. It's the magic rule of three in theater, so she does three of them now.

Audience Member #8: What percentage of the show is theatrical as opposed to autobiographical?

Dick Scanlan: When I published my novel, which was autobiographical, Ellen Currie said to me, "Now look, you're going to be asked how much of your book is true. Make up a percentage." So I would say, "Fifty seven percent." And it would be in *The Boston Globe*, "Scanlan says fifty seven percent of the book is true." So my answer is fifty seven percent because at this point the play is its own living organism. I'd have to sit down with Sherie and we'd have to figure it out. It's a very hard question to answer. Much of it is factual. Sherie likes to say that to us there's a difference between truth and reality, so I hope it's all true. I hope every word she speaks on the stage is true. We've worked really hard for that to be the case. But not all of it is real, certainly.

Ted Sod: As we wrap it up: are you working on something that we should know about?

Dick Scanlan: The two things that are most likely to happen sooner rather than later are a solo show for Rosie O'Donnell based on a memoir she published in 2002 called *Find Me*, which is very different in tone than this. I love working with her. The other big thing is a whole new version of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, which will be directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall, who has most notably directed and choreographed *The Pajama Game* for Roundabout. It doesn't get better than that. We'll do a workshop of it, and hopefully the next year or the year after it'll be in a theater near you.

Ted Sod: Let's take this opportunity thank Dick Scanlan for joining us today. We thank you, Dick, for taking part in the Lecture Series. This is the end of the series for this season, but we hope we'll see you all next season. Thank you so much.