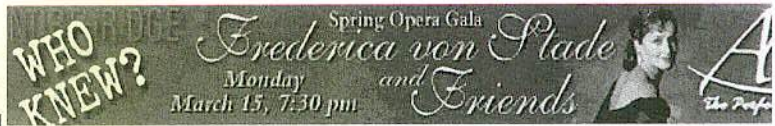


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Project is fueled by a one-track mind-set

A long ride on a New York subway is where the scripts and songs of the 'A Train Plays,' part of an instant-turnaround theater movement, are born and quickly raised.

By Josh Getlin
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NEW YORK — As he rode in a crowded New York subway car, rumbling 31 miles from Manhattan into Brooklyn and Queens, Stephen O'Rourke was scribbling furiously on a notepad — seemingly lost in thought but hardly alone.

A homeless man burst into the train car, shouting curses; peddlers swept past, selling batteries and sparklers; kids with boom boxes began break-dancing in the aisle and late-night riders broke into periodic arguments.

The interruptions were maddening. Yet it was all grist for O'Rourke and 23 other writers, musicians and choreographers who boarded the train last week, determined to write three musicals and three plays during a four-hour ride. They would perform them on a small stage the next night.

It was an exhausting, bone-rattling experience, bizarre even by New York standards. And nobody was in it for the money. But the creative stakes were high.

"I know this all sounds crazy," said Lawrence Feeney, an actor who helped create the "A Train Plays" project, now in its second year at The Neighborhood Playhouse in Manhattan. "But the subway is the classic New York experience, and the challenge for us is to capture something that races by so quickly, then disappears."

New York's subway, the nation's largest, will celebrate its 100th anniversary this year, and its impact on the city's cultural life has been profound: A flood of novels, paintings, movies, plays and television shows have portrayed the city's transit system as a human stage — with paranoia, desperation, spiritual inspiration and comic relief coming together in the largely subterranean world covering 722 miles of steel track.

From Seinfeld to Sondheim, countless artists have viewed the subway as the great leveler, a grimy arena where New Yorkers and visitors from all walks of life are thrown together and, for however briefly, forced to acknowledge each other's existence.

But few performers have grappled as intensely with the subway as Feeney's troupe, which is part of the city's burgeoning "24-Hour Play" movement. And in a culture obsessed with reality-based TV, the 12- to 14-minute "A Train Plays" productions pose an intriguing challenge: How do you produce art about the subway, on the subway, when the subway itself is forever getting in the way?

"You just roll with it, you draw inspiration from the craziness of the experience and let things happen," said Feeney, boarding the A Train — the city's longest line — at Columbus Circle in Manhattan and gearing up for the latest marathon. "This is a complex process. It has to run like clockwork."

The drill began at 4 p.m., when Feeney met at the northern terminus with the three writers who would be creating musicals. Standing near the tracks, they drew names out of a pouch and learned which actors would perform their works.

Then they boarded a southbound train and began drafting scripts during the two-hour ride to the end of the line. Hopping off, they drew more names — this time selecting the lyricists, musicians and choreographers who would work with them. Then they climbed back on the train.

"This is how people used to write Broadway shows in the good old days," guitarist David Ippolito said. "They'd reach into a bag and say, 'OK, George, you're with Ira.' "

Meanwhile, the three authors chosen to write subway plays drew the names of their actors and then boarded the same northbound A Train back to Manhattan along with other members of the troupe. More names were drawn to select directors, and the journey ended at 8:15 p.m., when all 24 collaborators met at the playhouse to begin rehearsing late into the night.

"The subway is grimy, difficult, unpleasant and has an air of desperation about it, much like the theater," said Michael Lazan, who was writing a musical. "The trick is to pick out the interesting characters you find on almost any train and develop them."

Sometimes it's hard to see them. As the train ambled through lower Manhattan, rush-hour commuters packed every inch of available space. More than 200 riders were squeezed into Lazan's car, which was smaller than a city bus, and there were moments when no one could move.

Hours later, as the train headed back through Brooklyn, the plays and musicals began to take shape. Writers were huddling with lyricists, and musicians began hammering out the first tentative notes of songs on guitars and portable keyboards.

As the players worked, they were interrupted by passers-by, demanding to know what was going on. Dozens of other passengers spoke on cellphones, and a few started to sing their own songs.

"The point is to draw on this action and let it guide you as a writer," said Erica Silberman, who was brainstorming musical ideas as the train passed through Queens.

Sometimes the action got rough. At one point, three loud-talking teenagers walked up to Silberman and Ippolito, who were going over lyrics, and did their best to interrupt. Two of the boys joked openly about stealing the guitar and other instruments.

"I knew a writer who saw a fistfight break out between two girls on the train," Silberman said after the teenagers had departed. "That's the kind of material you dream of."

Most of the writers were tight-lipped about the scripts they'd developed during the train ride, and said the works would be evolving in rehearsals through the night and much of the next day.

Less than 24 hours later, the curtain went up at the Neighborhood Playhouse, a full-time theater training school founded in 1928. Ticket sales for the "A Train" shows reimbursed the troupe for its costs. Any profits above that go to the school.

"Nobody is going to get rich doing this," joked choreographer Cynthia Tholey. "But it challenges your creative muscle, and it's a great test of the collaborative process."

The product of that process included "Free," a play by Craig Pospisil featuring a New Yorker who has a panic attack on the A Train and takes off all his clothes. An angry couple berate him, but when the woman begins reflecting on her own repressed life, she also takes her clothes off.

Anthony Pennino wrote of an adulterous New York couple who meet on the train soon after World War II to share stolen moments. Shawn Nacol wrote about a wealthy man and woman who confront two surreal Russian women on the subway at 3 a.m. and either kill them or don't kill them, depending on whose fantasy you believe.

The audience cheered each of the three plays, but the three musicals — each radically different from the next — drew the most appreciative responses.

Silberman's "Subway Sales" told of three businessmen — faces stretched tight by Botox injections — all grieving the loss of their wives. Their burden is eased when a mystical couple from Nepal board the train and magically remove stress lines from their faces, but not before breaking into "Believe It," an anthem about self-confidence.

Lazan wrote a musical within a musical, featuring three women in Elizabethan garb who are rehearsing the lines of a subway play while the playwright finishes the draft in the next car. Angered by his clumsy and clichéd portrayal of women, they tear up the script, haul the writer in and gleefully put him to death.

"All your femmes are fatale, they just castrate and flee, / For God's sake, why are we, stuck in your permanent pizza delivery fantasy?"

O'Rourke's untitled musical presented a theatrical couple who board the train at 3 a.m., doing research for a play. The aristocratic woman — irked that she has to portray a "gritty, ignorant prostitute addicted to cocaine" — looks for a real-life model to study and zeros in on a woman returning from her late-night shift working in a nursing home.

The beleaguered subject erupts with contempt and belts out a showstopper: *"Do you want my life? I don't think that you do. But if you want it, you can have it. I don't need it anymore. Do you want my life? Cause I can't take being me anymore."*

After the show, Feeney and the cast adjourned to a neighborhood bar. The performances would continue for five more nights, they said, and there was time to polish each production. Then the cycle would begin again.

"We're doing six more of these plays and musicals next week," Feeney said, checking a list of who would participate. "The A Train keeps going, and so do we."