

## The History of Goodspeed's Festival of New Musicals

The idea for the *Festival of New Musicals* (originally known as the *Festival of New Artists*) originated with former Executive Director Michael Price and was led by previous staffers Sue Frost, Associate Producer and Will Rhys, Education and Library Director in coordination with Henry Fonte, formerly of The Hartt School at the University of Hartford. Prior to the creation of the Festival, Goodspeed had launched a number of programs related to new works development and education.

The first of these initiatives occurred in 1973, when Lehman Engel brought the Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) Musical Theatre Workshop to Goodspeed. BMI had joined forces with Lehman Engel in 1961 to create a program that enabled new musical theatre writers to learn and hone their craft. In 1973, this workshop was held on the Goodspeed campus and offered beginning musical theatre writers a safe place to create new work, receive feedback from people in the theatre community, and escape the pressures that can inhibit the creative process. The BMI workshops led Goodspeed to create its own event in 1978, titled the *Musical Theatre Seminar*. This seminar also focused on the creation of new works and featured several prominent members of the musical theater community (eg. Lehman Engel) as speakers throughout the program. Both the *BMI Workshop* and the *Musical Theatre Seminar* were held at Goodspeed until 1980, when both events came to an end. Goodspeed continued to produce new works throughout the early 1980s by staging *Preppies*, *Bodo*, and *Ataria* in the Larry McMillian Rehearsal Studio or in Johnsonville. This continued dedication to new works of musical theatre led to the creation of The Norma Terris Theatre, which was inaugurated in 1984 and dedicated to the development of new musicals.

Two decades later, Goodspeed worked with BMI to bring another new works initiative to Goodspeed. In 1997, Associate Producer Sue Frost met with Skip Kennon, one of the members of the transitional team who had been placed in charge of the BMI Workshop after the death of Lehman Engel in 1982, to discuss the idea of offering BMI participants the opportunity to create staged readings at Goodspeed's Norma Terris Theatre. Kennon and the other heads of BMI agreed to the partnership and they focused their attention on two new musicals, *A Visit from the Footbinder* and *Dorian*. These shows rehearsed for one week at the Larry McMillian Rehearsal Studio before being staged at The Norma Terris Theatre. Unlike similar readings in New York, however, these readings were open to the public, allowing the authors to experience feedback from candid audiences rather than industry insiders. Audiences were spellbound by *Footbinder's* unique mix of Bunraku puppetry and musical theatre, and *Dorian* was similarly well-received. After further development, *Dorian* (based on the Oscar Wilde novel) was eventually selected for a full production at The Norma Terris in 2000. The results of the partnership with BMI were positive, and they encouraged Goodspeed to seek out other groups with a similar mission to promote new works development.

During the early 2000s, Goodspeed Musicals entered into a partnership with the Graduate Musical Theatre Writing program at NYU and began offering students a week-long residency to collaborate on the 90-minute musicals they were required to write for their master's degrees. The quiet, often snowy, month of January in East Haddam took the young writers out of their chaotic Manhattan environs, allowing them to fully focus on the creative process. At the end of

the week, selected scenes from three musicals were presented before an audience at Larry McMillan Rehearsal Studio.

Offering students a safe haven to create new works aligned with Goodspeed's mission to discover and nurture new musicals; however, despite the effectiveness of the initiative, the level of readiness of the student works was inconsistent. Therefore, making it a yearly event open to audiences in this form seemed unwise. But Goodspeed did not discard the model. Based on the success of the *BMI Workshop*, the *Musical Theatre Seminar*, and the *NYU Writers Residency*, Goodspeed staff conceived the idea of starting a Goodspeed "Festival" with then-Education Director Will Rhys, using local talent. Goodspeed was aware of the superior reputation of the musical theatre program at The Hartt School at the University of Hartford and decided that a partnership between Hartt and Goodspeed would benefit both institutions. At an Arts Council meeting in the early 2000s, Goodspeed broached the idea of creating a "Festival" event with Henry Fonte, a faculty member for The Hartt School. Fonte and Hartt agreed to work with Goodspeed and the *Festival of New Musical*s was born.

*The Festival of New Musical*s began with a radically different structure than is seen in its current form. Initially, juniors and seniors at Hartt took part in the Festival and students in the NYU Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program provided the material to be performed in staged readings. The actors and writers partnered with a professional director, actor, and music director to mentor them during the program and to help streamline their production. This formula worked well with the educational goals of The Max Showalter Center for Education in Musical Theatre at Goodspeed and attracted funding from the The Adolph and Ruth Schnurmacher Foundation.

The Festival grew during its second year, but it was not until the third annual event that any major changes to the structure occurred. During the Third Annual Festival, Goodspeed featured a reading of a show entitled *Genesius, The Musical*. This piece featured a book by LJ Fecho with music and lyrics by Goodspeed's own Resident Music Director, Michael O'Flaherty. By including a show created by theatre professionals rather than students, the Festival began to gain acknowledgement as an important resource in the industry and a useful tool to aide in the creation of new works. With this subtle validation in place, the Festival evolved into a method whereby Goodspeed's Artistic Staff could explore promising new works from across the country. The Hartt School continued to provide the actors for the program, but Goodspeed gave writers the opportunity to choose their own director and musical director for the staged readings. Eventually, this model proved so successful that Goodspeed began to involve students from The Boston Conservatory in the staged reading casts.

Today, the Festival is a rite of passage for seniors at Hartt, and many spend their entire academic career waiting for the day they will grace the Goodspeed stage. All senior Musical Theatre students at The Hartt School are cast in the staged readings. Additional students from the Boston Conservatory participate as needed, depending on the size of the shows. Immediately after the New Year, all the Hartt graduating seniors and a selection of Boston Conservatory's seniors arrive in East Haddam for their first day of rehearsal and to audition before the creative teams. They live in Goodspeed housing side-by-side with a show's writers and directors, making them an integral part of the collaborative process. All of the shows rehearse for a two-week period and the Festival culminates with students performing staged readings of the shows on the Opera

House stage before seasoned Goodspeed patrons. In addition to staged readings, the annual event features seminars by musical theatre experts, two cabaret performances in the Gelston House dining room, a preview of the upcoming Norma Terris season, a symposium, a festival dinner, an exhibit in the Scherer Library of Musical Theatre, tours of Goodspeed facilities, and a chance to meet the Festival writers to learn about their writing process.

Looking back, it is doubtful that anyone could have guessed what a strong influence the 1973 *BMI Workshop* or the 1978 *Musical Theatre Seminar* would have on Goodspeed Musicals, nor that they would lead to one of the most anticipated annual events at Goodspeed. Yet, somehow the long road of musical theatre exploration and experimentation led to an event that is one of the most important new works Festivals in the country. And although the *Festival of New Musicals*, currently led by Line Producer Donna Lynn Hilton and Associate Producer Bob Alwine, occasionally yields a piece that is fully produced at The Norma Terris Theatre, its primary purpose remains to cultivate the talent of promising new musical theatre artists.