GOODSPEED MUSICALS

AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

THEORY OF RELATIVITY

A NEW MUSICAL
## Audience Insights for The Theory of Relativity

Audience Insights for *The Theory of Relativity* was prepared by:

- Joshua S. Ritter, M.F.A, Education & Library Director
- Kathryn Micari, Education & Library Assistant
- Katherine Griswold, Creative Content Manager

Goodspeed’s *Audience Insights* can be found on our website: [www.goodspeed.org/guides](http://www.goodspeed.org/guides)
A couple of years ago, Michael Rubinoff, the Associate Dean overseeing the musical theatre program at Toronto’s Sheridan College, invited us to develop a show with his students. We considered a number of our works-in-progress but really wanted to write something new, although we had no idea what it could be.

At the same time, we happened to be at the University of Oklahoma working on our adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s Something Wicked This Way Comes, a piece in which every character is over 50 or under 13.

The average age of our cast was 20.

Now, it’s a fact of life that in every college musical theatre program some poor student will have to play Tevye or Aunt Eller or Madame Armfeldt, but we wondered if there might be a way to cater to this age group more specifically—to write something college students can directly relate to.

It seemed that the Sheridan College invitation might be the perfect opportunity to do just that.

Of course, we didn’t dare to presume to know what goes on in the heads and hearts of today’s millennials. So, we invited the Something Wicked cast out for pizza and asked them to tell us what was on their minds. (We quickly learned that if you feed students, they will happily talk.) Since these were musical theatre students, we braced ourselves for stories of show tunes and Broadway dreams. We got a refreshing surprise instead. The students shared with us endlessly captivating tales of family, fear, love, loss, and the need for human connection—and in their stories was an incredible individuality and an astounding commonality.

Inspired by that pizza-fuelled conversation, we started crafting a song and text “cycle” (an overused word but we can’t think of anything better) specifically for and about college students with Neil supplying the music and lyrics and Brian writing connecting material, scenes, and monologues. Within a year, the first draft of The Theory of Relativity was ready for a reading with the talented Sheridan College students as part of the Canadian Music Theatre Project. This was the perfect way to begin development of the show and the wildly talented students leapt in with both feet.

Since that presentation, many others have jumped on board. Penn State, Baldwin Wallace University, and the University of Michigan have all worked on material from the show. There was even a gorgeous production in London. Along the way, we’ve picked up new inspiration for stories and songs and with each presentation of the piece, we’ve tweaked, adjusted, and rewritten in an effort to find the most effective arrangement of the puzzle pieces.

In 2014, Goodspeed invited us to present The Theory of Relativity as part of their Festival of New Musicals. Of course, we said yes. We love it here and it felt like the perfect next step. It was during that presentation that we learned that audiences beyond the intended 20-somethings seemed to relate to these stories. Many audience members told us “My grandchildren are going through the same thing” or “We’ve all been that age.” Our surprise at the depth of feeling expressed in the students’ stories was equaled by our surprise that the show might actually resonate beyond that demographic.

As a small side note, we’ve just returned from rehearsing and presenting The Theory of Relativity at the University of Oklahoma with many of the same students who inspired us over pizza only a few years ago. Full circle.

And now, here we are back at Goodspeed, which is fast becoming our second home, to tweak and revise and rewrite with another group of extraordinary young actors. We look forward to sharing this version of The Theory of Relativity with you. We hope you enjoy yourselves and maybe even find a little of yourselves in these stories.
NEIL BARTRAM (Music & Lyrics) is the composer and lyricist of Broadway’s The Story of My Life with book writer Brian Hill which earned them four Drama Desk Award nominations including two for Neil—Outstanding Music and Outstanding Lyrics. Prior to Broadway, The Story of My Life played at Canadian Stage Company in Toronto and Goodspeed’s Norma Terris Theatre. Neil has also written music and lyrics for Clara’s Piano (Stratford Festival), Somewhere in the World (five seasons at the Charlottetown Festival) and The Nightingale and the Rose, and scored productions of Romeo and Juliet, Timon of Athens and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. His adaptation of Carlo Collodi’s The Adventures of Pinocchio was commissioned by Chicago Shakespeare Theater for their 2011 season. Neil and Brian’s musical Not Wanted on the Voyage received a developmental production at Northwestern University’s Barber Theatre as part of the American Music Theatre Project and was part of Goodspeed Musicals’ 2012 Festival of New Musicals. His musical The Theory of Relativity, commissioned by Toronto’s Sheridan College and written specifically for and about college age students, was part of Goodspeed’s 2014 Festival of New Musicals and had its London, UK premiere in May of 2014.

Current projects include Spin directed by Eric Schaeffer which premiered at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, VA, an adaptation of Michel Tremblay’s Les Belles-Soeurs, a musical based on Ray Bradbury’s classic novel Something Wicked This Way Comes, and the stage adaptation of Disney’s beloved film Bedknobs & Broomsticks, all with book writer Brian Hill. Neil’s awards include a Jonathan Larson Foundation Award, a Dramatists Guild Fellowship, and a Dora Award. Cast albums include Somewhere in the World and The Story of My Life (PS Classics). Neil is a member of the Dramatists Guild, ASCAP, and is an alumnus of the BMI Lehman Engel Music Theatre Workshop.

BRIAN HILL (Book) has traveled across Canada and the United States as an actor, director and writer. As an actor, he spent three seasons with the Shaw Festival, appeared as Raoul in the Toronto production of Phantom of the Opera, performed the role of Joe Gillis in Sunset Boulevard and won a Dora Award for outstanding performance as Frankie in the original Canadian cast of Forever Plaid. For the Stratford Festival he directed Gilbert and Sullivan’s Patience and was associate director of Susan H. Schulman’s acclaimed productions of Man of La Mancha and Fiddler on the Roof. For four seasons he was artistic director of the Confederation Centre Young Company and served as the Charlottetown Festival’s associate director of new play development. He was resident director of the Toronto, Vancouver and national companies of Forever Plaid and served as associate director to Susan H. Schulman for the U.S. national tour of Sunset Boulevard and the first national tour of The Sound of Music. For Disney Theatrical Productions he directed the reading of High School Musical 2, was resident director of the Toronto and Broadway companies of The Lion King, and associate director of Broadway’s The Little Mermaid.

With composer and lyricist Neil Bartram he has written the book for Not Wanted on the Voyage (Goodspeed’s 2012 Festival of New Musicals), The Nightingale and the Rose, Clara’s Piano, Somewhere in the World, The Theory of Relativity and The Adventures of Pinocchio, which was commissioned for the 2011 Chicago Shakespeare Theater season. Current Bartram and Hill projects include Spin with director Eric Schaeffer, which premiered at the Signature Theatre in 2013, an adaptation of Michel Tremblay’s Les Belles-Soeurs, a musical adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s Something Wicked This Way Comes, and the stage adaptation of Disney’s Bedknobs and Broomsticks. Brian is best known as the book writer for The Story of My Life, which was developed at Goodspeed’s Norma Terris Theatre, premiered on Broadway in 2009 and earned four Drama Desk Award nominations for outstanding musical, music, lyrics and book.
INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW WITH BARTRAM AND HILL

Donna Lynn Hilton, Line Producer for Goodspeed Musicals and Bob Alwine, Associate Producer for Goodspeed Musicals conducted the following interview after a staged reading of the show at Goodspeed’s 2014 Festival of New Musicals.

DONNA LYNN HILTON: Please help me welcome the writers of this afternoon’s piece, Neil Bartram and Brian Hill. Okay, I have a big question. Do you never tire of devastating me in song?

BRIAN HILL: No, that’s our job!

DONNA LYNN HILTON: Tell us how this piece came about because, well, I’ll ruin the story by saying it. Like Come from Away from last year’s Festival this piece was a commission from Sheridan College. But tell us about that relationship please.

NEIL BARTRAM: It was a commission by Michael Rubinooff. He commissioned us to write this and really, Michael approached us and just said “whatever you’re working on we’d love to have you come out and work with our students at Sheridan College on it.” And we’ve done that before and we’ve always had amazing experiences working in the college environment, especially at the early stages of development of a piece. But since he approached us and like I said we’ve had great experiences but the kids are always playing way out of their age range. We’ve had a piece where somebody’s playing a 50 year old man and others are playing 12 year old kids and we thought, if we have the opportunity, why don’t we create something that’s just aimed right at their age group and create something fresh.

BH: In fact, where we first started working on the idea of this was at the University of Oklahoma where we were doing a reading of Something Wicked This Way Comes. Every character is either over 50 or under 13 and we thought “well, why don’t we write something that they can actually relate to.” So we had the cast of Something Wicked This Way Comes, and other students from Oklahoma, come over to our house and we fed them pizza and if you feed students pizza they’ll talk! We said “we want to know what’s running around in your heads. What concerns you in life?” And we thought it was going to be “hey, we want to go to Broadway” because they were all musical theatre students, but what kind of stunned us was that they had these incredibly profound concerns about life, relationships, home, family, what’s going to happen once I leave my family, and all that kind of stuff. We absorbed this stuff like sponges and then Neil went away and started taking the seeds of those ideas and fleshing them into stories. So everything you saw on the stage today is somehow based on some student’s actual story. We wanted the piece to be very much about the students, not the actual material but about what they personally bring to it. We hope we can hand it over to more and more students as time goes on. So that’s how it started.

BOB ALWINE: One of the things that was interesting when they sent this to us, which was quite awhile ago, was that it was a no-brainer to include in the Festival. Because as they say, it really was appropriate for the students to be able to do a piece like this. And these guys are so great. We were talking in that big audition room and everyone is discussing who gets this and who gets that. And these guys are “we can take anyone that’s left and we will make them wonderful” because that’s what they do. They allow the students to really shine in the pieces that they have.
NB: The great thing about doing this for students is that we don’t have age requirements. Whereas some of the other shows have like specific things that they need and we’re like, we’ll just take anyone and then if it doesn’t work that’s our fault.

BH: You asked the question of other writers, “What did you learn?” One of the things that we wanted to learn here is, can we take a piece that includes actual students stories and was developed on another set of students, can we take that piece and hand it over to another set of extraordinary students and say find your own thing in this. Find yourself in this. And now, honestly, after seeing this today I’m looking at this thinking that I can’t imagine any other group of actors doing this because they found such personal stuff in it. They were so unique, so special and they found their own thing yet they’re completely different from the cast we had in Toronto and completely different from the kids that told us their stories a year ago.

DLH: So other than clarifying the stories that you came here with these stories have not changed in the last two weeks?

NB: There were two new things that were added in based on our first go at this. The song “Apples and Oranges” was new. That replaced something and the counterpoint to “I’m Allergic to Cats.”

BH: Julie the cat lady.

NB: “Julie’s Song,” that was new as well.

BH: There’ve been a lot of tweaks and rearranging. It’s always hard with a piece like this that isn’t a story to figure out how it actually fits together and how we shape it into something that feels somewhat satisfying.

BA: I thought that was one of the most successful things not only when I read it but definitely when I saw it today. Because when you’re sitting there as an audience member you go “oh yeah this is song cycle and there are all these little individual pieces coming up there.” Then she sits down to get her manicure and suddenly it all comes together. And that to me is the real beauty of this piece, that it ties everyone together just as everyone in this room is tied together though you don’t know each other. I think it was a brilliant idea. I don’t know where that came from.

BH: I’d love to say we planned that but that was such a last minute thing when we finally had all the pieces.

NB: Honestly, Brian is the evil genius behind all of that because I write these songs and say “try to make that work, try to make this work.” (Laughter) And then he does somehow. He makes that speech seem like it’s natural and organic.

BH: Evil.

DLH: Questions for this group?

AUDIENCE: This was a marvelous reading with them all standing there doing their own thing. How do you now take the music stands and microphones away and put it onstage? How do you turn it into some sort of a unified play with all these diverse, separate people?

BH: Oddly enough we worked backwards this time. When we did it up at Sheridan College, where Michael works and where he commissioned it, we did a staged performance of it. There was a space, a set, design, costumes and things. This was an interesting step back to just go back to the material and the students. So we’ve actually been there and it worked really nicely and it oddly kind of works in this concert form too. We also wanted to put this out there as something that’s written specifically for colleges so whatever college wants to do it we want them to take it and do whatever they want with it. We want them to put it on the stage in any way that they see fit. So we kind of leave it up to them once it’s out there.

AUDIENCE: It feels as if it’s written to really work well with just a four-person cast. Was that your thought?

NB: I think it can work with all kinds of numbers. If it’s a four-person cast obviously they’ll have to be doing a lot of different things and the ensemble numbers won’t land with a big sound. But it can be done with four or it can be done with 40. We really just, again, just because it fits the colleges and universities we thought “here is the material go and take it and do what you want.”

AUDIENCE: This is somewhat related. First of all, the students were absolutely magnificent and I found myself when they were all lined up at the end of the performance in love with every one of them for all different reasons, which I hope was your purpose.

BH: We fell in love with them too.

AUDIENCE: One comment and somewhat of a complaint. At the end of that marvelous tour-de-force cameo performance by the young gal who is an art history major and was having the blind date with the physics guy in the show, she was just amazingly funny, but at the end of her monologue it immediately transitioned into a very quiet moment and there was no chance for applause. Is that something that you consider? Is that something that you plan out?

BH: I think we planned that, yeah.

NB: Yeah. Although, when we did the show in Toronto the structure was the same and sometimes people would
applaud. We would just hold for that and then move on, we would just move through it. I guess that the point of the piece is that at the end it becomes about the greater world, and not just about one person. She hits it out of the park, there's no doubt about it. She was incredible and hilarious and everything that she needs to be, but I guess our instinct is that if too much energy goes towards that one performance, it diffuses the idea that it's kind of about all of them at that moment.

BH: Agreed.

AUDIENCE: I want to share something that was just so special today. I heard at least two people come down the staircase this afternoon and they were discussing the show. They said that this was the new millennium of A Chorus Line. From their mouth to God's ear!

AUDIENCE: I have a question. When the script is sent to a university, does it include more songs and more stories to pick from?

NB: Well, we did consider that if a university wanted to do it and wanted us to be involved in any way that we would somehow meet with the students, maybe hear some of their stories and then I might write another song based on something. This would add a unique element to their production. And just to get back to an earlier question, as it travels out in the world of course there are mercenary reasons to do anything but when Michael first talked to us about this idea and we started talking about it, we thought there was some value in the students being able to tell their own stories and that was kind of the thing at the root of it.

BH: Yeah.

DLH: There's a huge value in it.

AUDIENCE: I'm struck by you saying that two songs were added here, especially the cat lady one. It seems so rewarding. I love that those two people go together. What does it physically look like in the script? Are the characters listed as A, B, C, D, and E? What are their names?

BH: That's what we're trying to figure out. How do you put it on the page now to hand over to people to do? It's tricky and we're still working that out.

AUDIENCE: I'm glad I asked a really hard question.

NB: The “Julie's Song” question. I just ran out of time when we did it the last time. It had always been on my mind to complete that story and I just ran out of time. In fact, I actually want to say that I started this last year at the Johnny Mercer Writer’s Colony here. The “Great Expectations” song was written here.

AUDIENCE: If I may…

NB: Oh no. It's people we know asking questions now!

AUDIENCE: Only because we had the privilege of doing the second production of this at Pennsylvania State University after it was initially done at Sheridan. These are the two directors who directed it at Penn State. For people who were quizzical about how it would transform into a physical production when it's fully staged, let me say it works beautifully and it was astoundingly moving. Also, we did it with 11 people. Just 11 people and everyone managed to be a complete individual and take that material and find very visceral personal responses to it. It was incredibly moving to watch and I was incredibly proud of our students. Even though the material did not originate with them, they made it seem as if it had; so I thought that was wonderful and I think that it has a great future. It's so hard to find a piece that young people can do, that gives everyone their moment and yet also works as an ensemble piece. That double experience in a theatre program, as you know, is so important so we thank you for the piece.

AUDIENCE: And we love the new songs!

DLH: Because even if they’re not the individual stories of the students performing it, these are issues that kids are grappling with.

AUDIENCE: We all are!

DLH: We all are. That’s the truth. Okay, we have time for one more brilliant question.

BH: But don’t feel any pressure.

AUDIENCE: This isn’t a question, I’m sorry but we’ve been coming here for four years and this was just such an amazing piece. I had tears in my eyes at the end; it was just brilliant.

BH/NB: Thank you.
The Theory of Relativity is a new musical that was created in conjunction with The Canadian Musical Theatre Project and Sheridan College in Toronto. The show centers on the experiences of college students and offers its audience a glimpse into the concerns and questions plaguing young adults today. However, since the show is based on interviews with real people facing real issues, the musical strikes an emotional chord with audiences of all ages. Neil Bartram, the composer of The Theory of Relativity, shared during an interview in 2015 that the show’s stories “resonated with us, even at our age, because we’ve all been through it, too. And you’re looking at them from the angle of looking back at our processes at that age.” Whether someone has studied in a traditional college or university setting is irrelevant when considering the overall message of the show that uses the themes of family, interconnectedness, and finding a place in the world to demonstrate the struggles that young adults are facing in society.

The Theory of Relativity identifies relationships, family, and the general fear of leaving childhood behind as the core worries of modern young adults; yet, the apprehension of facing a post-collegiate world is not strictly limited to modern culture. A character in a Harriet Beecher Stowe novel published in 1871 refers to his senior year in college by saying “during my last year, the question, ‘What are you good for?’ had often borne down like a nightmare upon me. When I entered college all was distant, golden, indefinite, and I was sure that I was good for almost anything that could be named.” With a few minor changes, these words could have been spoken today and are similar to the stories and lyrics of The Theory of Relativity. Now, as then, most students have no clear concept as to why they are in college, much less what they plan to do when they go out into the world.

William R. Brody, former President of Johns Hopkins University said “if you went to a college class circa 1900 and you went today, it would look exactly the same.” While there have been fairly radical changes to most college environments since 1900 like gender equality, racial integration, and the advancement of technology, the mindset of the average college student has largely remained the same since Harvard, the first college in America was founded in 1636. Each young man or woman that enrolls in one of the 18,641 postsecondary educational institutions in the United States today faces the same concerns as the characters in The Theory of Relativity or in Stowe’s novel; they are wondering what their purpose is and how to live away from their families for the first time. Whether you’re discussing a college student from 1900, 2015, or 2236 you can be sure of these essential qualities; they are unsure, eager, joyful, and susceptible to the demands or wishes of parents and peers, yet, above all else, they are searching for their place in the world.

While the mentality and the experience for college students may have remained similar across time, the realities of parents have not. College used to mean that a first-year college student would have to “disconnect” from their families in many ways and rely on letters, post cards, and the occasional phone call to keep in touch. The advancement of technology has allowed families to stay connected in unprecedented ways, which has changed how many families approach the college experience. Due to increased parental accessibility, students may be tempted to rely on their parents to solve their problems and parents may be tempted to do so; yet, college is largely regarded as one of the first steps towards independence and finding a balance between being a child and being an adult can be difficult for all involved. One particular song called “Footprints” in The Theory of Relativity addresses how difficult it can be to understand the changes that occur when someone goes to college and offers a remarkable insight into what family really is, stating “Yes, your footprint goes with you. It’s something you don’t lose. From the family you were born with to the family you choose.”

College has long been a place for young men and women to experiment with the idea of adulthood and discover how they will impact the world around them. The fact that college is often considered a rite of passage does not mean that it isn’t frightening; in fact, it can mean just the opposite. Going to college forces young adults to leave the familiar safety net of their families behind and embark on a new life without the guideposts on which they have tended to rely in high school. Is it any wonder then that typing the word “college” into BarnesandNoble.com returns 15,1682 search results? The Theory of Relativity addresses these concerns and offers the viewer the idea that college is about more than studying; it’s about finding a way to be an individual while still maintaining connections.
Science and art are often viewed as opposite pursuits; yet, there appear to be significant connections between them. Science explains, or attempts to explain, the workings of the world on a universal scale, allowing human beings to understand their surroundings in minute detail, whereas art, in all its forms, can be a lens through which scientific discoveries can be processed emotionally. Neil deGrasse Tyson has said, “If science is embraced by artists, that’s the best evidence that it’s become mainstream.”

Recently, science has become a major part of mainstream pop-culture with a strong presence in television, theatre, and movies. The number one most-watched television show in America is *The Big Bang Theory*, and week after week millions of people tune in to watch a group of quirky scientists navigate their way through social situations. The movie industry has turned Comic-Con into a massive star-studded event that regularly features events based on science and has also released films like *The Planet of the Apes*, *Iron Man*, *Divergent*, and *The Hunger Games*. Social media also demonstrates an affinity for science with one of the most popular pages on Facebook being titled “I F***ing Love Science.” *The Theory of Relativity* has followed this trend and uses science as a metaphor for human connection, most notably Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity.

Einstein’s theory of relativity has two basic parts, the theory of special relativity and the theory of general relativity. However, according to Space.com and NASA, the simplest way to explain the theory of relativity in general terms is “that the laws of physics are the same for all non-accelerating observers, and that the speed of light in a vacuum is independent of the motion of all observers.” In other words, no matter how quickly two people are moving, light will hit them at the same time. Based on this observation, Einstein discovered that space and time are connected and that events that occur at one time for one observer may occur at a different time for another observer. This discovery implied a connection that had not been considered previously and forced the scientific community to adjust its views of space and time. From a non-scientific point of view, Einstein’s theory demonstrated a connection between human beings that forced society to stop and consider how the same event could appear to take place at different times in different ways. The authors of *The Theory of Relativity* explore this idea of simultaneous occurrences and differing observations in their piece. The musical demonstrates how seemingly unrelated events in space and time connect to each other and, in turn, connect the lives of strangers.

Society is a mass of technological advancement with new phones, space exploration, and scientific breakthroughs occurring on a regular basis. Yet, most of the technology that is being created is focused on connection, either connecting people to each other in the form of cell phones, social media, and smart watches or finding new ways to connect with the universe.

I STAND ON A MARBLE THAT HURTLES THROUGH SPACE. MY ORBIT AND PATH ARE UNIQUE. AROUND ME THE PLANETS, THEY SWIRL AND THEY RACE, WHILE I WATCH HERE HUMBLE AND MEEK. I’M HELD TO THE EARTH BY A FORCE I CAN’T SEE. BUT I STRIVE EV’RY DAY TO TAKE FLIGHT. I AM ENERGY. I AM MASS. I AM LIGHT.

-“Relativity” from *The Theory of Relativity*
“When you are courting a nice girl, an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder a second seems like an hour. That’s relativity.”
-Albert Einstein

“An artist deals with aspects of reality different from those which a scientist sees.”
-Richard Wright

“Everybody’s a mad scientist, and life is their lab. We’re all trying to experiment to find a way to live, to solve problems, to fend off madness and chaos.”
-David Cronenberg

“If Person A’s initial position is seven miles from Person B, and A is walking at a rate of four miles per hour and B is walking at a rate of five and a half miles per hour at a thirty-eight degree angle to the path of Person A – how soon will they meet and how will the path of each person be altered by that contact?”
-The Theory of Relativity

Please take a moment to consider the following questions and discuss them with friends, family, and fellow audience members.

• “The Theory of Relativity is a joyous, youthful musical exploration of the surprising interconnectedness of our own personal orbits as we stand “motionless” on this little rock hurtling through space.” Based on this description, what is the significance of the show’s title?

• The Theory of Relativity is based on interviews with real college students and is set in the present day. Would altering the time period change the show’s message? How and why?

• Compare your own experiences and concerns to those raised in The Theory of Relativity. Based on your analysis, how accurate was The Theory of Relativity in portraying the concerns of young college students?

• The idea of home, family, and what they mean is a common thread throughout The Theory of Relativity. How did your own definitions of home and family change based on your experiences in college?

• The Theory of Relativity has been performed in multiple countries as a staged reading and as a fully realized production with varying cast sizes. How do you think the show would change based on its presentation style? How might the production be impacted with a larger cast?

The cast of The Theory of Relativity ©Avital Greener.
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THEORY OF RELATIVITY

DEGREES OF CHANGE

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