

INDIAN JOE

New Work In Progress:

An Interview with Line Producer Donna Lynn Cooper Hilton

How did *Indian Joe* and Elizabeth A. Davis find their way to Goodspeed?

Elizabeth and *Indian Joe* were introduced to Goodspeed by Carolyn Rossi Copeland just as we were preparing to launch the inaugural Johnny Mercer Writers Colony. We had worked with Carolyn on the successful developmental production of *Amazing Grace* at our Norma Terris Theatre, so when she suggested that we might respond to *Indian Joe*, we bit. We invited Elizabeth to work on *Indian Joe* at the Mercer Colony in 2013.

What about the project convinced Goodspeed to commit to a developmental production?

I am drawn to uniquely American stories and to stories that expose the truth of human relationships. *Indian Joe* is both. It tells the beautiful story of Elizabeth's relationship with Joe Gonzales, a man of Choctaw descent, who was homeless and living under a bridge in Waco, Texas when Elizabeth, then an idealistic college student, first met him. She set out to improve the lives of Joe and others in the homeless community in Waco. In working to do so, she learned unexpected lessons about friendship and family. Joe, who died in the fall of 2014, affected Elizabeth's life in profound ways that she is driven to share. Elizabeth's music is a killer mix of bluegrass, country, West Texas boot stomping with a touch of industrial rock dropped in. I was also excited about the prospect of a project heavily weighted with female creative team members - writers, director and non-profit and commercial producers. It was hard to resist the whole package.

What has the development process been like for the show at Goodspeed up until this point?

Elizabeth has spent two residencies at Goodspeed supported by the devoted team of artists who are drawn to this project, including Jason Michael Webb and Luke Holloway, who have contributed to the score with arrangements and orchestrations, Chris Henry on book, Director Kim Weild, Music Director Matt Castle, Dramaturg Lee Trull and Carolyn. We've supported two table reads as well as a full reading with the cast of our production. The team spent a week at Rhinebeck this summer and emerged with the draft that we will take into rehearsal next week.

How has the show grown and changed over the past year of development?

Can I get away with just saying 'tremendously'? Truthfully, this has been as challenging and beautiful a journey as I've taken with a new work (and I've been blessed to have taken a lot of beautiful journeys in my work with new musicals). It is very important to Elizabeth and to those of us working with her to tell Joe's story faithfully and to use this opportunity to positively impact the lives of others who face similar challenges – yet we are creating a piece of theatre. As a result, choices that are always difficult feel even more so. We are having a lot of challenging conversations that evolve around the intersection of truth and great storytelling.

What about the show makes it a good fit for Goodspeed's mission and audience?

A commitment to developing new musicals and emerging writers has been central to our mission for most of our 52-year history. Elizabeth is known as a Tony-nominated actress, but most probably don't know that she's a great songwriter as well. As for our audiences, they've shown us over and over again that they value truth in storytelling, even when that truth might be difficult to face. Like NAMT Member audiences everywhere, they love a great score. *Indian Joe* is rich in both.

Why should people check out the show this fall?

We guarantee they will be moved, they will laugh and they will leave with the soles of their feet sore from stomping to the music. But seriously, we invite our NAMT colleagues to the Norma Terris this fall to experience a unique and moving piece of theatre that will leave them with hearts full. That's an experience that always helps me face the next creative challenge ahead.



Goodspeed Line Producer Donna Lynn Cooper Hilton (2nd from left) with the Indian Joe creative team