



George Abud, Harvey Valdes, Ossama Farouk, Sam Sadigursky and Garo Yellin in *The Band's Visit*.

Photo by Matt Murphy

Backstage With *The Band's Visit*

Producer Orin Wolf and Writer Itamar Moses talk about their multiple Tony Award-winning show

By Liz Rothaus Bertrand

When Orin Wolf saw an early screening of the film *The Band's Visit*, he had an immediate impulse: to put it on stage. "It was a moment of clarity for me that doesn't happen very often in my life," says Wolf. Some eight years later, his initial inspiration would become one of the most celebrated and critically-acclaimed musicals of all time.

Winner of 10 Tony Awards in 2018, this story of an Egyptian military band that gets stranded for one night in a remote Israeli village is now beginning a national tour, and Charlotte audiences will be among the first to see it. *The Band's Visit* comes to Knight Theater Aug. 6-25.

Tony-winning writer Itamar Moses and Wolf, the show's lead producer, recently visited Charlotte to talk about the show's origins, the creative process and some highlights of their journey. Here's what they had to say:

INSPIRATION

Wolf, who already had a cultural connection to the story (his wife is Israeli), recalls three things that convinced him it would be ripe for a stage adaptation:

1. People are stuck.

"That's a theme in a lot of the plays that has shaped my love of the theater, spanning everything from Chekhov to O'Neill to Mamet to Moses," says Wolf.

2. People use a second language to communicate.

"I've always believed fundamentally that theater as a medium is about the exploration of language and how we communicate," says Wolf.

3. Musicians are part of the story.

"I always have a problem with this

Continued on Page 7

notion that people start singing randomly,” says Wolf, “so the idea that this band was lost and had their instruments on them and were stuck with them felt for me as a sort of a rationalizer of musicals ...”

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

In some ways, this show was easier for Moses to write than other musicals he’s created since a screenplay already existed. “The bones of it were already very sound because the movie’s very good,” he says. The first step was creating a full-length play without any music – keeping the parts that translated to the stage and adding components to fill in the story as needed.

One particular challenge of adaptation was conveying emotion when cinematic tricks like actor close-ups and wide pans of the desert weren’t possible. “You have to replace those visual metaphors with theatrical metaphors,” says Moses, who grew up in California, the son of Israeli immigrants.

Once they had a script, he and composer David Yazbek (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *The Full Monty*) worked together to find the best moments to add music. The process was collaborative and ongoing, as Yazbek – who is of Lebanese and Jewish descent – created a score unlike anything else on Broadway. Filled with Middle Eastern melodies and instruments, music became a central way the characters connected with one another.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JOURNEY

Winning the Tony was thrilling but Moses says his most gratifying moment took place during previews for the initial off-Broadway run. He and the rest of the creative team kept tinkering with the show until one memorable night. “We

started seeing the audience walking out at the end kind of shaken, and with tears in their eyes and hugging each other,” says Moses. “We realized that this thing we’d been after, this very hard to pin down alchemy that was going to create this deep emotional experience for people, had happened.”

Later, when critics agreed and were able to articulate to the public what the creators had intended and the awards started rolling in, it just felt like icing on the cake.

For Wolf, looking back at the show’s Broadway success and now bringing it to cities like Charlotte is extremely gratifying. “There’s so much going on in the world that’s daunting and overwhelming and noisy and angry, and yet this gentle show has been embraced by a commercial audience in a commercial industry. And to me it just fills me with optimism,” says Wolf. “It fills me with joy that the world we inhabit made room for the musical *The Band’s Visit*.”



Bill Army and Sharone Sayegh in *The Band’s Visit*.

The Band’s Visit

Aug. 6-25 • Knight Theater

704.372.1000 • BlumenthalArts.org