

CREATIVE INSIGHTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB MARTIN

BOB MARTIN (Book) is a Tony Award®-winning writer, performer, and producer whose sharp humor and heartfelt storytelling have made him one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary musical theatre. He co-created and starred in *The Drowsy Chaperone*, earning Tony Awards® for Best Book of a Musical and Best Original Score. His celebrated writing credits also include *The Prom* (Tony® nomination for Best Book of a Musical), *Half Time*, and more.

Known for his ability to blend comedy with genuine emotion, Martin's work often explores the joy, absurdity, and humanity of show business itself. Most recently, he co-wrote the book for *BOOP!® The Musical*, the new Broadway production that reimagines the legendary Betty Boop for the stage. With his signature blend of wit, heart, and theatrical flair, Martin continues to craft stories that delight audiences and celebrate the power of performance.



What was your process of taking the cartoon character of Betty Boop and that world and turning it into a live theatrical story?

It was an interesting process because Betty herself does not have a traditional story. In the original Betty Boop cartoon shorts, there is no one story so we had to decide what story to tell. We examined the fact that Betty has existed for nearly 100 years in popular culture and we asked ourselves, why is that? What is so appealing about her? Then we crafted a story that would best illuminate those aspects of her.

Looking at the nature of her shorts, she's an intelligent, attractive, sassy woman, but looking at her work, I realized that though she was often pursued by men, they very rarely captured Betty's attention or captivated her heart. That was the big epiphany that I had.

I should say the whole project started with Jerry Mitchell, the brilliant Jerry Mitchell, saying that he wanted to start in the Fleischer cartoon world, go to the real world, and then return to the Fleischer cartoon world which then becomes filled with color. That sentence helped to inspire the story itself too, because she goes into the real world, discovers what it means to be completely human. She discovers the nature of romantic love. Then when she returns to her cartoon world, that world is forever changed by that knowledge.

This show had been in development for years before I came on board, yet there was never really a fully realized book for the musical. There were half a dozen songs that were written that were quite brilliant. So, part of the exercise was also to create a story where the songs would make sense.

How did you craft the story to include those songs and the new songs into the show?

Well, one really good example of that process is the song "Something to Shout About." This song was originally written basically as an "I want" song in a previous version of the musical as the second song in the show. However, when Jerry Mitchell heard it, he thought it was way too powerful to be the second song in our show, that it needed to be at the end of our show, like the "11 o'clock number."

When I was looking at that song, I wondered when would Betty sing something so powerful. It really would be when she realized that she finally understood what romantic love was, but had lost it. So, the song that at first expressed her want for this thing that she couldn't name was then repositioned in the score to express the pain she felt for losing that thing. It really did serve exactly the traditional musical theater purpose, which is when an emotion is so great it can only be sung.

As the story emerged, we started to spot



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these places where— where ideas needed to be expressed, you know, musically. One of my favorites is the scene on the roof in the second act between Betty and Trisha. In that particular scene, Trisha is basically explaining to Betty what romantic love is because Betty is experiencing these feelings without understanding them. Then Trisha explains that what she's feeling for Dwayne is different from the affection she might have for Grampy. It's a different kind of love. She's explaining this while also reminding Betty of the terrible experiences she's had in life where she lost her own parents. So that moment is a moment where Betty is so moved by everything that this girl is saying and everything this girl has been through that she had to sing to her. She had to express how extraordinary Trisha is as a person and how she needs to show the world who she is rather than just dress as Betty Boop, so she sings "My Hero."

Another example of song development is in the first act where Betty asks Trisha why she's so enamored with the character Betty Boop. When Betty comes into the real world, she meets Trisha who is dressed as her. This is a surprise to Betty, and she doesn't really understand why. In the first act, Trisha sings "Portrait of Betty," where she's enumerating all of these things that she admires about the character, all qualities that she herself feels she doesn't have. It's the other side of that same musical equation. In the first act, Trisha sings about all the things that she lacks that Betty represents, and in the second act, Betty tells her how extraordinary she is. Betty explains that Trisha must start being herself and show the world who she is and not pretend to be Betty.

Do you find that you gravitate towards certain kinds of stories or themes in your work?

I was talking to Kevin Kline recently about this, and I said that one of my goals is to make comedies that make people cry. So, **BOOP!**

achieves that goal, I think, because Betty's a cartoon character coming into a world of real people, feeling and understanding everything that they're dealing with--problems much more complicated than the ones she deals with in her shorts. Then she discovers this wonderful thing that makes us all human, this idea of love, and then loses it. Getting people to laugh at the antics and then getting them to cry at the real emotion is what I really, really strive for.

I guess many of the stories I write about are sort of "fish-out-of-water" stories. *Elf* is the closest parallel, perhaps. In *The Drowsy Chaperone*, Man-In-Chair escapes into a world of make-believe that somehow heals him a bit. It's a bit of a heightened world he's disappearing into that he wishes the real world were more like.

What advice would you give to students who might want to adapt an existing story or character to write a piece for the stage?

I think you have to sort of empower yourself to completely reinvent what you're adapting. If it's a film, don't fall into the trap of simply putting the film on stage. Your main goal should be to create a piece of theater, something that is inherently theatrical. It really couldn't be expressed any other way. You might get nervous if it's an adaptation of a movie that people love and want to see. I guarantee you people who love a movie and then see that movie put on stage in a way that can't possibly duplicate the language of film are really going to hate it. But if they see it as a piece that's a theatrical interpretation of the same material, then they can appreciate both equally. I think that's the goal of good adaptation. It really is thinking about it as a piece of theater--how theater moves and what's entertaining, what works on stage, as opposed to the kinds of cuts and everything that a film could be, or, you know, the detail that a novel goes into or anything like that.