

"If I follow that sound,  
I could find what I'm lookin' fer."  
—"The Call," *Floyd Collins*

As a young composer with a background in classical music, jazz and rock, Adam Guettel '83 could have followed any number of sounds. But when he found what he was looking for, it was in a place he never intended to look: musical theater.

Writing musicals was "the last thing I wanted to do," Guettel, now 40, says with a laugh. "The general perception of musical theater is that it's as uncool as it could possibly be"—a once-glorious form whose golden age is long past.

But that was before Guettel actually tried writing a musical, and discovered just how thrilling "writing for character and telling stories through music" could be. "After the first draft of *Floyd Collins*," he says, "I never looked back."

Guettel and his collaborator, Tina Landau (who wrote *Floyd Collins*' book and directed the original New York production), based their 1996 show on the true story of a Kentucky man who, in the winter of 1925, became pinned in an underground cavern he had hoped to turn into a tourist attraction. After early rescue efforts failed, Floyd himself became the tourist attraction, drawing large crowds to what one account called a "death-watch carnival." "It's about a guy who had a dream," Guettel says, "and who died pursuing it. He was literally trapped in it." *Floyd Collins* is filled with one gorgeous, heart-rending melody after another—and, despite Floyd's increasingly desperate plight, with hope as well.

"Once I got a taste of that experience," says Guettel, who wrote the show's first-rate lyrics as well as its score, "I couldn't not do it again and try to be better at it. There is something about a live human being coming downstage, delivering a song and representing us in some way—albeit a compressed way—that you cannot get from any other art form. The rewards are so unearthly."

For Guettel's admirers, the feeling is mutual. "The songs shift key joyously, recklessly, madly, confidently, whoopingly free," playwright John Guare wrote in the liner notes for the cast recording of *Floyd Collins*. Guettel, he added, "knows how to write for the voice as well as anybody around." "The talent is there, and it's major," agreed *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden in his review of Guettel's 1998 song cycle *Saturn Returns* (later recorded under the name *Myths and Hymns*).

Of his latest musical, now playing at New York's Lincoln Center Theater, *New Yorker* critic John Lahr observed, "*The Light in the Piazza* doesn't want to make theatergoers feel good; it wants to make them feel deeply."

Adapted by playwright Craig Lucas from Elizabeth Spencer's 1960 novella, *The Light in the Piazza* tells the oldest story known to musicals: a love story—but, as Guettel puts it, an "off-axis" one. Margaret Johnson (Victoria Clark) is a wealthy American woman traveling through postwar Italy with Clara (Kelli O'Hara), her radiant yet oddly fragile daughter. In a sun-drenched Florentine piazza, Clara meets Fabrizio (Matthew Morrison), a handsome Italian youth, and the pair fall quickly in love.

What knocks this romance off axis is not only the growing sense that something is amiss with Clara, but also the fact that the young lovers are surrounded on all sides by older couples whose love is in varying states of decay. "I wanted the deepest, most passionate kind of love story," Guettel says, "but one that wasn't all tied up in a bow. His ravishing score (due to be released by Nonesuch Records later this month) embodies love's whole story, from "that first great bloom of hope and ecstasy" to disillusionment and despair as that bloom withers. The deepest feelings coursing through *The Light in the Piazza* are not Clara's, but Margaret's: her maternal passion for her daughter, her regrets over her own marriage and her hope that Clara might find the sort of love she herself has lost.

For Guettel, it's a show "about emotional ambition, about reaching for the real thing, hoping that you'll find it, living with not finding it." For *Wall Street Journal* critic Terry Teachout, it's not just the season's best musical, but "the best new musical to open in New York since [Stephen Sondheim's] *Passion*." In the era of "the jukebox musical," Teachout says, "*The Light in the Piazza* is a little masterpiece of understated yet heartfelt beauty that offers a greatly needed reminder of just how emotionally involving [musical theater] can be."

Guettel's early reservations aside, musical theater was his birthright, albeit a daunting one. His maternal grandfather was composer Richard Rodgers, whose career not only spanned the golden age of Broadway musicals, but, in his many collaborations with Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein, pretty much defined it. His mother, former Academy trustee Mary Rodgers Guettel, is also an accomplished composer, whose musical comedy *Once Upon a Mattress* made a star out of Carol Burnett.

Like his grandfather, Guettel was something of a prodigy: a gifted singer, he had already made his Metropolitan Opera debut by the time he arrived at Exeter in 1979. Music, he says, gave him "the

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FRED CARLSON

## Table Talk

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sense of being right with the world, and of having a place in the world.”

At Exeter, that place was the music building, where he found freedom to develop himself as a musician, thanks to instructors like Irving and Charlie Forbes, Martin Amlin and, most especially, the late Tommy Gallant. A well-known jazz pianist, Gallant became something of a father figure to Guettel, teaching him how to play the upright bass to fill a hole in the jazz band, then later taking him out on paying gigs. Gallant “opened up the kind of music I made from classical piano into jazz and rock,” says Guettel. “It was a big window for me.”

Exeter also provided other valuable vocational training. In a collaborative medium like theater, Guettel says, “you really have to be able to share your vision for a piece and convince people that what you see is going to work. The Harkness system was good in that way, because you were always on the hot seat. You never knew when you were going to be asked to express and defend your point of view.” From Exeter, he went on to Yale, and after college began composing scores for documentaries and incidental music for the theater, work that eventually led to *Floyd Collins*.

Yet entering what amounted to the family business was not without risks: that he would inevitably be compared to his grandfather, and his own work potentially obscured by the long, sunny shadows of *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific* and *The Sound of Music*. “I knew the chances were high I wouldn’t be able to succeed in the terms he had,” says Guettel, who took this theme and wove it into *Floyd Collins*. Floyd doesn’t find the success he was looking for, but in “How Glory Goes,” the

powerful song Guettel wrote to close the show, he finds something else: spiritual peace.

Oscar Hammerstein once remarked of Rodgers that he “composes in order to make words fly higher or cut deeper than they would without aid of his music.” It’s an outlook his grandson has clearly inherited, along with a faith in the artistic possibilities of the musical—Broadway’s current penchant for spectacle and self-parody notwithstanding.

“Musical theater is kind of eating itself alive right now,” Guettel says. “There’s a tendency to make fun of the form as a way to generate material. But for me, human nature is plenty. Human desire is plenty. I want to generate new things, and I think what can be done has barely been tapped. There’s a universe waiting for us.”

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## Exoniana

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From here go forth to UNH  
Four years  
Spent at good old PEA!”

What more can you say? We  
were a truly sophisticated lot.  
*Peter Bassett '67*  
*Atlanta, GA*

## JANGLED

The inscription is over the front door of the Academy building. I traveled through that door five or six days a week for three years to go to my 8 a.m. Latin and Greek classes—even Saturdays, which, nearly 30 years later, seems especially brutal. Nothing like sight translations before breakfast to make the palms sweat and the nerves jangle, especially as we waited with trepidation for Mr. Coffin to call on us. He had high standards and it was unbearable for me, at least, to disappoint him with a sloppy job.

We female grads from the

1970s used to comment a lot on the first inscription. I arrived at Exeter in the fall of 1974, and girls were still a new thing on campus. Often there were just one or two girls in a class of 10 or 12. As we got older, we used to talk amongst ourselves about the fact that in many ways the school did turn us into little men. What we needed, we used to reflect as we began our big-city corporate or professional careers, were “wives” to help us with the perennial juggle of personal and professional responsibilities. The business part was easy: we had been well trained at Exeter and knew how to work with, and compete with, men. It was the girl stuff that was more challenging for us.

I know the school has changed, and I can’t believe I’m writing this as if I’m an “old-timer.” But when I saw the inscription I couldn’t refrain from sending in the memory. So often I’d read it as I was racing up those marble stairs, each step worn down by generations of boys—and here I was, part of a new generation of Exies that included girls! I went into class to read about the love affairs of Dido and Aeneas, whose emotional longings I never understood until well after PEA days.

I don’t regret my time at Exeter one bit. I loved it; it was the best thing for me. But back in those days, it was still experiencing growing pains in its dealings with girls and women, and there were some repercussions. I’m glad to see the new inscription includes “puellaeque.”

*Beth Nelson Cliff '77*  
*North Attleboro, MA*

## PRANKSTERS

Many students regularly exposed to these inscriptions over the front door of the Academy Building surely reflected on their portentous meaning—the responsibility of education

and the transition from childhood to adulthood—but I must confess, the two memories that came back to me on seeing the photo were far less weighty.

First, I recall that during one of my Academy years, Fisher Theater mounted a production of the musical comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The musical takes place in front of three Roman houses, one of which is a brothel. Smart-alecky student that I was, I (somewhat) facetiously suggested to Technical Director Bette Ogami-Sherwood that we should put “Huc Venite Pueri Ut Viri Sitis” over the door of the brothel. And, sure enough, she did it. Definitely not a politically correct joke, but a funny one nonetheless. I have plenty of memories of the empowered irreverence and force of will that was drama instructor Bette Ogami-Sherwood, but this is one of my favorites. I’m saddened whenever I think how she died too soon, robbing more young Exonians of the privilege of learning from her.

Less melancholy, I also recall that during the end of my senior year, some pranksters somehow managed to hang a replacement sign in front of the lintel, this one bearing the Dante quote “Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.” As pranks go, this one was all right—witty, literary and not causing permanent damage to the facility. What more could you expect from Exonians?

*Ali Kokmen '88*  
*New York, NY*

## TWO ON ONE

Both inscriptions are found on the front of the Academy Building, and are translated as “Here boys come to become men,” and “In this place, boys and girls seek courage and knowledge,” respectively.

*Dominic Ireland '05*  
*Exeter, NH*