

AMERICAN THEATRE

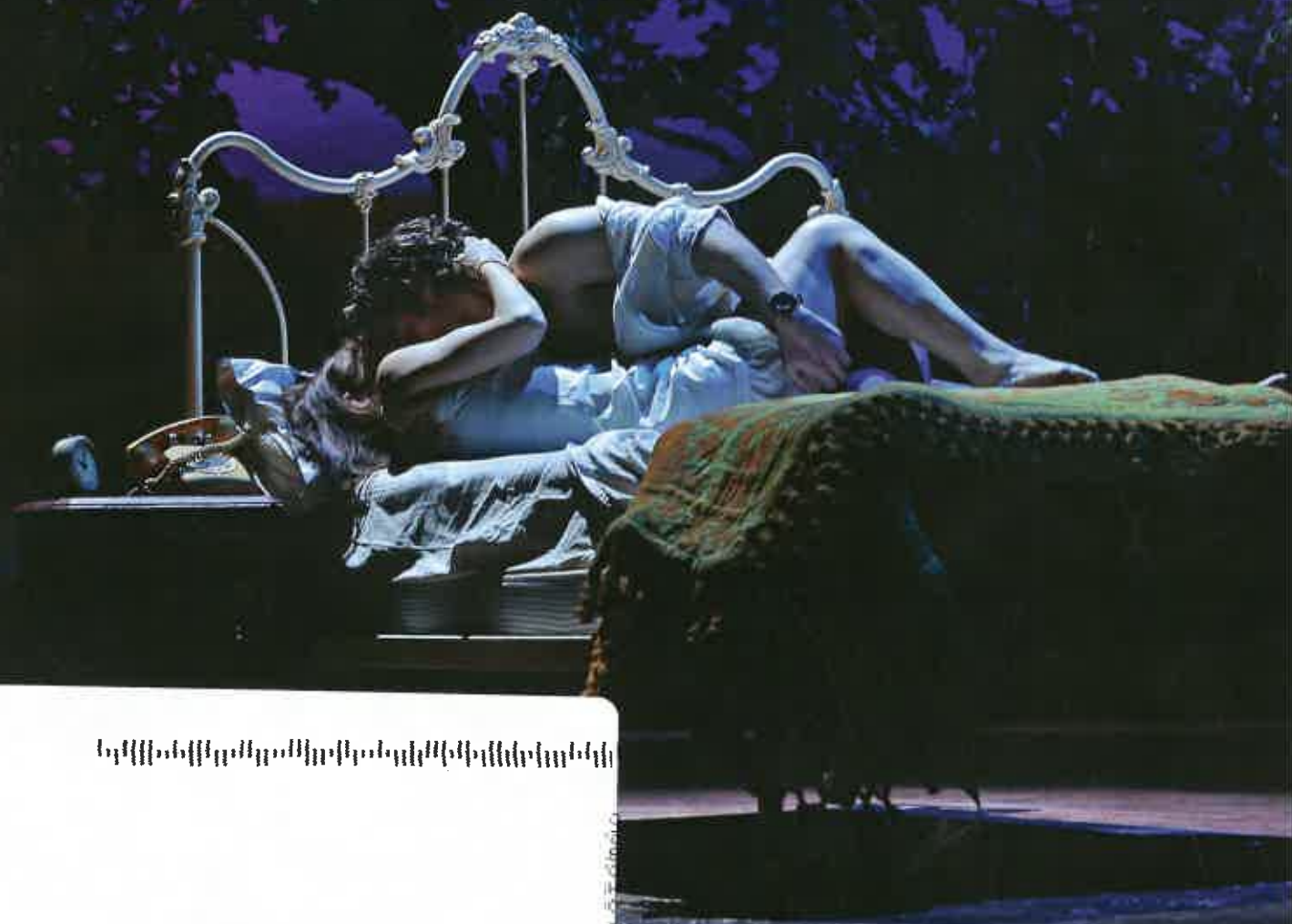
MARCH 2014 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

COMMERCIAL &
NONPROFIT:
Better Friends than Ever?

Sprinting with Director
ANNA D. SHAPRIO

PLUS:

Lucas Hnath, Craig Lucas,
Comics by Kreitzer & Katz,
Yiddish Theatre Lives



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■ DALLAS

WHEN DIRECTOR DANIEL AUKIN started adapting Jonathan Lethem's novel *The Fortress of Solitude* into a musical, he was living a few streets away from the Brooklyn block where the book takes place.

"It affected me very, very deeply," Aukin says of the story of two motherless boys—one black, one white—growing up in the 1970s. "I wasn't particularly looking for something to adapt, but there was something exciting about the possibility of this story being made into a musical. That thought just wouldn't let go."

Aukin brought Michael Friedman on as composer/lyricist and Itamar Moses as book-writer, and the trio secured the rights from Lethem, whom Aukin calls "unbelievably generous," and started working without a commission. Luckily, many theatres were just as passionate about their concept—developmental workshops were slated at Los Angeles's **Center Theatre Group**, Massachusetts's **Williamstown Theatre Festival** and Poughkeepsie's **New York Stage and Film**. Next up: The musical premieres at **Dallas Theater Center**, where it runs in a co-production with New York's **Public Theater** March 7–April 6. The Public will stage the show in the fall.

ON THE BLOCK

WHERE YOU LIVE



Daniel Aukin

"It has been a really heartwarming example of how the entire TCG edifice can support a project," says Friedman, who notes that music serves as the "emotional backdrop" to the story, which takes place over approximately 30 years. "That's the way we experience things now—I think of it as the iPod experience," Friedman ventures. "The same way that when you go through a break-up, you pull out those songs and they have a meaning for you... I tried to create a score that was almost built for memory. When songs return, you remember different moments in the show, and it starts building a narrative that way."

Lethem incorporates descriptions of pop songs, most of them fictional, and Friedman found himself in the funny position of writing real songs from Lethem's prose. "He created his own history of the music," says Friedman, admiringly.

But don't be fooled—the musical takes many departures from the novel. "To really own this material in a musical theatre form, we need to detach a little," says Aukin. "It's not what the movie would look like. One has no choice but to make a theatrical gesture of the evening." —*Suzy Evans*

■ OLNEY, MD.

LEAVES OF CHANGE

LAUREN GUNDERSON IS NO stranger to science and history. With works that delve into the lives of scientific pioneers, such as Isaac Newton (in *Leap*) and physicist Emilie du Châtelet (in *Emilie: La Marquise du Châtelet Defends Her Life Tonight*), Gunderson frequently puts scientists under the microscope onstage. However, with *I And You*, running at the **Olney Theatre Center** in Maryland through March 23, Gunderson turns to a giant not from science but from American literature: Walt Whitman, and his poem "Song of Myself." "His language is so muscular and vivacious," Gunderson says. "Whitman has that sense of *carpe diem*." In the play, 17-year-old Caroline is dealing with a chronic illness as she takes part in a group English project on Whitman's seminal poem. "This play is very contemporary—and it's realism," Gunderson explains. "It's a real departure for me." —*Nick Reichert*

■ NEW YORK CITY AND MIAMI

THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS

CUBA HAS LONG BEEN THE NEXUS of colliding worlds, from the European conquest of the Americas to the Cold War. And fraught, fateful sea voyages to or from the crocodile-shaped island have figured largely in its history, from Hernán Cortés to Elián González.

In his sinuous new play *Sotto Voce*, Nilo Cruz (*Anna in the Tropics*, *Two Sisters and a Piano*) mines a lesser known real-life boat ride from 1939: the passage of the *MS St. Louis* from Germany to Cuba. Its passengers—937 Jews and others fleeing Nazi persecution—were turned away not only by the Cuban government, but by the U.S. and Canada. Most of the remnants ended up back in Europe, and nearly a third perished in the Holocaust.

Cruz's play, which runs at New York City's **Theater for the New City** through March 9 (before showing at **Miami-Dade County Auditorium** March 20–23), takes a twice-removed "memory play" approach to this heavy material.

The Cuban-American playwright knew he didn't want to set his play on the ship—the book and film *The Voyage of the Damned* already went there. He wanted to create a thorny, lyrical, occasionally steamy cross-generational courtship between Saquiel—a young Cuban Jew whose grandfather waited in Havana in vain for his sister, a *St. Louis* passenger—and Bemadette, a German novelist who in 1939 watched her Jewish lover board the *St. Louis* in Hamburg, never to see him again.

Liberty is on his mind these days, as Cruz feels his native Cuba "is loosening up—they're headed in that direction. Though there's fear of change—of how change is going to affect the country and the people." They might take a cue from Bemadette, a German name that means "having the courage of a bear." —*Rob Weinert-Kendt*

Franca Barchiesi and Andhy Méndez in *Sotto Voce*.