

## **MAX UNDERSTOOD**

**Nancy Carlin and Michael Rasbury**

Max Understood is an invitation into the life of a 7 year-old boy with autism. As Max embarks on a transformative odyssey beyond the confines of his parents' apartment, his unique perspective reveals the beauty and mystery of the world around him. Paving the way is a leaf-blowing philosopher, a string theorist, Pegasus, a mermaid, and all the presidents of the United States. This surreal musical for seven actors is created with sound design as integral to the music and script.

Our intention is to create an innovative and effective piece of theatre. We are attempting to find a new form of music-theater. This is by no means merely an "issues" piece. But we are also fully aware of the huge impact that autism is having on many families. In the United States, some believe that 1 out of every 120 children born will be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Max Understood has the potential to inspire people to understand our fellow citizens with autism in a new, appreciative way. And, it will represent and contextualize an abstract but recognizable experience to a growing number of theatre audiences.

In the fall of 2006 we conceived of the idea to create a piece of theater that with sound, music and text might theatrically convey experiences of autism to a "typical" audience. Inspired by the composer's son, and his family's challenges and joys, we were inspired by the way he expresses himself; a unique and deeply profound way of communicating with "sampling" from films, songs, or television. These expressions of stunning and precise metaphor come from a boy with a condition that deflects the ability to grasp the abstract. This made for unlikely, yet a perfect, poetry.

In November 2007 we participated in Foothill Theatre Company's "New Voices". The feedback at the readings was extraordinarily positive and the debates over what had been experienced were quite lively and passionate. The revelation was that people went with the dreamlike experience we created. That many were sincerely moved was thrilling to us.

We were invited to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Music Theater Conference in July 2008. Here, with superb collaborators, we had a very productive and inspiring session, and forged alliances with artists who encouraged us to boldly go forward and expressed desires to join us on the journey.

We were 2009 National Alliance for Musical Theatre (NAMT) finalists.

On September 28, 2009, Max Understood opened for six performances at the 45<sup>th</sup> St. Theatre in midtown Manhattan as part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival (NYMF.) David Schweizer directed a cast that included Michael Winther, Everett Quinton, and Marlon Sherman. We were awarded "Outstanding New Musical" by Talkin' Broadway and garnered some extraordinarily positive press from American Theater Magazine, TheatreMania, and Broadway World.