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U.Va. Drama Professor to Premiere Original Musical About Autism in New York

July 16, 2009 — What does the world sound like to an autistic child?

For Michael Rasbury, an assistant professor of sound design at the University of Virginia, it sounds like the repetitive sampling of sounds from a child's interactive toy about the U.S. presidents.

"Pre-pre-pre-pre-president. Pre-pre-pre-pre president," the voice says as the child pushes the button again and again. It's a theme that Rasbury employs throughout the score of his new musical, "Max Understood," inspired by his 9-year-old son, Max, who has autism.

Organizers selected the production to be presented at the 2009 New York Musical Theatre Festival – billed as "the Sundance festival of new musicals" – which runs Sept. 28 through Oct. 18 in Manhattan.

Rasbury conceived of "Max Understood" along with director and actor Nancy Carlin of Berkeley, Calif., whom Rasbury met at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival in 2006. They collaborated to write the musical and compose and record the original score inspired by Max's daily struggle with autism and the challenges that his parents and other parents with autistic children face every day.

Rasbury uses music to create a metaphor for those experiences. In one composition, "Meet Max and the Machine," Rasbury repeats parts of words from the sampled game to represent not only what Max might be hearing, but also the way he has observed his son playing with the toy.

The musical is told through the eyes of a child with autism as we follow then-7-year-old Max, briefly lost and separated from his parents, on a miraculous adventure through the outside world, where seemingly normal yet magical characters share common experiences. These characters represent the "stages of childhood development," Rasbury said.

"Max Understood" also explores parenting a child with autism and a coming to terms with "normalcy."

"I am trying to reflect how strange it can be and how inspiring, creative and exciting it can be to deal with the daily process of living with autism – trying to reflect what may be happening in his head and just how imaginative he really is," Rasbury said.

"'Max Understood' is, at its core, an awareness piece, because it provides the experience of autism to its onlookers," he said. "Imitating something is a way of understanding it, and those who see the piece may feel more benevolent in the future when asked to support causes focused on unlocking autism."

Rasbury was delighted to learn earlier this month that his musical had been accepted by the prestigious festival, but said he is also overwhelmed by the deadlines for submitting fees, raising funds, hiring actors, renting rehearsal space and rehearsing the musical before its scheduled late-September opening.

"The process is now moving at an incredible pace," Rasbury said. He had to give the festival a \$5,000 deposit earlier this week "and we need another \$15,000 in hand by early September to rehearse and produce the musical."

For information about "Max Understood" or the New York Musical Theatre Festival, visit [here](#) or [here](#). Persons with interest or questions can also contact him directly at 434-989-3351 or at michaelrasbury@michaelrasbury.com.

— By Jane Ford



Michael Rasbury and his son Max (click for high-res version)

(Photo: Jane Haley)

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