

La Jolla Playhouse's "Lempicka":

A Behind-The-Scenes Q & A with the Writers

by Nathalie Feingold

The La Jolla Playhouse is presenting "Lempicka," an original and stirring musical about a young painter named Tamara de Lempicka, set against the brutality and disarray of the Russian Revolution. Tamara and her aristocratic husband are forced to flee their upper-echelon lifestyle to seek security and anonymity in the city of Paris. From there, Tamara climbs the ranks of Parisian society; starting as a refugee with few resources to becoming a highly sought-after portraitist. She then meets a free-spirited woman from the slums of Paris named Rafaela. Rafaela becomes the painter's muse and opens her eyes to a completely new world. ♦ This is an exclusive interview with Carson Kreitzer and Matt Gould, the writers who brought "Lempicka" to life. ♦ "Lempicka" is showing at the Mandell Weiss Theatre June 14 through July 24.

Q: Can you start by providing some backstory on *Lempicka*? What first inspired you to create the concept behind this musical?

CARSON: I've spent most of my life as a playwright telling the stories of women I wish I'd known about growing up — iconoclasts, women who refuse to "behave," who will not stay within the bounds society imposes on them. A friend encouraged me to check out Tamara, saying, "You're gonna love her, she's one of Your Women!" And indeed, I found the Taschen art book and there she was — knotty, complicated, maddening, glorious. I was instantly pulled in by her work and then as I learned more, equally compelled by her wild, tumultuous life.

I knew I could write a play about her, but that seemed... too small to contain her. There's something so extreme,

so grand, about her work — it's larger than life and it felt like the truth of this story was demanding music! But what music? I took the songwriting workshop, telling myself, "Now, don't expect to find a composer, this is just to start learning about the form, meeting people and getting a sense of what I should be looking for." Then I met Matt, and I knew what the musical should sound like.

MATT: We'd written a killer song together about something totally unrelated to art, but Carson tackled me at the end of the workshop and asked me to meet her at a diner on 42nd St. So at the diner, I'm eating matzoh ball soup and she starts waving the Taschen art book in my face that highlights the work of Lempicka, and I was like, "This art sings! It's a musical!" Not all stories make good musicals. But I heard music the minute I saw the art.

Q: What are the major themes of the production?

MATT: The themes in the show that most stand out to me are related to the battles that we all face between choosing love or security; art or fame. It feels relevant in a world so obsessed with image and the curated versions of ourselves we share on social media. It is a show about a woman whose story — whose art — isn't celebrated in the same ways as her male contemporaries because she's a woman. It taps into the ways that, throughout history, those in power hold their power by dividing and conquering those without power — women, queer people, people of color, poor people, etc.

CARSON: Yes, yes, all of that! For me, there's also the core story of a woman finding her true self. Tamara was raised



Rachel Chavkin, Director of La Jolla Playhouse's production of LEMPICKA
(PHOTO BY ERIC YANNI RO)

Raja Feather Kelly, Choreographer for La Jolla Playhouse's production of LEMPICKA (PHOTO BY KATE ENMAN)



Carson Kreitzer, Book, Lyrics and Original Concept for La Jolla Playhouse's production of LEMPICKA

Matt Gould, Book and Music for La Jolla Playhouse's production of LEMPICKA
(PHOTO BY NATHAN JOHNSON)



in privilege and was expected only to marry well and be a society wife. And she did marry well — in Russia, just before the Bolshevik Revolution. She and her husband were forced to flee, to become refugees in Paris. She had to learn how to survive, how to work, and found her true, powerful self through upheaval, through losing everything. If not for revolution and exile, she would never have become a painter. She would never have become Lempicka.

Q: Can you describe the Jewish angle of "Lempicka"?

MATT: Well, Tamara's father was Jewish — a fact which, certainly in our story, she denies as a way to survive a world that is intolerant of Jews. Nevertheless, her lineage was a ticking time bomb against the backdrop of a world racing towards fascism and Nazism.

CARSON: [Being Jewish] was already something to be "kept quiet" in wealthy Russian society, and became far more dangerous. I do think it helped her see what was happening in Europe, and take the threat seriously. She got her family out, ahead of the worst, as so many around her still believed it couldn't happen. Not in Paris. Not here.

Q: How have your Jewish backgrounds influenced this musical?

MATT: Both Carson and I come from Jewish households. I went to Hebrew School and was bar mitzvahed in my hometown, Santa Clarita, CA. Certainly, I think that both of us are the products of parents who consciously or subconsciously taught us about the finiteness and ephemerality of safety and life. I think those ideas figure prominently into how Tamara

navigates through the circumstances of her life.

CARSON: Matt's much more "Jewish" than I am. We weren't a particularly religious household in any way, but I'm definitely culturally Jewish, especially in terms of an obsession with close readings of text and humor as a necessary survival mechanism.

Q: So far, what has been the most rewarding part of the production process? What has been the most challenging aspect?

MATT: We've been working on this show for 12 years. Some of the most fun moments happened early in our writing process — the two of us locked in a basement in New Haven or a rehearsal room in New York starting to *continues on next page >>*

'Lempicka' continued

write songs; and thinking, "Oh my God! That's gonna be great! Someday when somebody performs this it's gonna be epic!" I don't think either of us thought it would take this long to bring it to life. But every day in rehearsal now is like a new gift that we left ourselves years ago. It's very satisfying and deeply emotional.

CARSON: The reward is being in this glorious room, watching our show come to life. Watching [Director] Rachel and [Choreographer] Raja work their magic, listening to these gorgeous voices living in this music.

And I'd say the most challenging aspect has been Covid — mostly in the enforced two-year pause, while our

entire industry was basically unplugged from the wall. We're all being very careful, testing constantly, masking, so it feels manageable right now. But it's not something you can just forget about.

Q: What are the biggest takeaways that you want the audience to leave with?

MATT: I hope that the audience falls in love with the complicated, hard, wonderful, awful, beautiful mess that is this stunning artist. And I hope that we all walk out of the theater thinking about how the historical backdrop of her story is scarily similar to what we are living through now; and how our individual choices will play a role in determining whether we wind up in war or peace.

CARSON: Yes, as we've worked on "Lempicka," it has felt increasingly relevant to the times we're living in. But I don't think we were prepared for how startling and terrifying the parallels have become. Our characters are living their lives in the shadow of impending fascism. Which felt significantly more historical when we began. Now, I keep finding myself thinking, "Is this what it felt like, just before?"

I also want people to think about their own lives, and whether they are being lived as fully and as bravely as they can be. This is the gift Tamara has been for me, all these years working on the show. Not, like, a nice gift. An intense, difficult, important gift. As is only fitting, from Tamara. ✨