La Jolla Playhouse’s “Lempicka”: A Behind-The-Scenes Q & A with the Writers

by Nathalie Fesmold

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 disorder of the Russian Revolution. Tamara and her aristocratic husband are forced to flee their upper-class lifestyle to seek security and anonymity in the city of Paris. From there, Tamara climbs the ranks of the 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 skum of Paris named Babi. Babi 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.

CARSON: “I’ve spent most of my life as a playwright telling the stories of women. I wish I’d known about growing up—indiscipline, writers who refuse to ‘behave,’ who will not stay within the bounds society imposes on them. A friend encouraged me to check out “Lempicka,” saying, “You’ll love her, she’s one of ‘Your Women!’” And indeed, I found the “Lempicka” art book and there she was—knotty, complicated, maddening, glorious. I was instantly pulled into her world 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 demanded. 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, getting 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: Well, written songs for her about something totally unrelated to art, laced with music, I’d been working on the musical and decided to ask her to meet us at a dinner on 42nd St. So at the dinner, I was trying to make a musical show and she started writing a song for the musical show. It was the song that highlighted the work of Lempicka, and I was like, “This art speaks! This musical!” But not all songs 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’s a real woman who is obsessed with image and the curated versions of herself we share on social media. It’s a show about a woman whose story is one of rebellion, a story celebrated in the same way as her male contemporaries because she is a woman. It is the story of a woman who is celebrated in the same way as her male counterparts because she is a woman. It is the story of a woman who is celebrated in the same way as her male counterparts because she is a woman.

Q: Can you describe the Jewish angle of “Lempicka”?

MATT: Well, Tamara’s father was Jewish—a fact which, in certain circles, she denied as a way to survive in the world that is intolerant of Jews. Nevertheless, her lineage was nothing less than a battle against the backdrop of a world racing towards fascism and Nazism.

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

CARSON: “Lempicka” has already something to be “kept quiet” in wealthy Russian society, and became far more dangerous. I do think it helped her for what was happening in Europe, and to keep the threat serious, she got her family out, ahead of the worst, so as many around her still believed it couldn’t happen. Not in Paris. Not here.

Q: How does your Jewish background influence your work?

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Q: What is the most unusual aspect of your show?

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Q: What is the most challenging aspect of this production?

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Q: Do you plan to work 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 York starting to write, the music and the language of the show is so much more natural than anything else.

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Q: How do you feel about the reception of your show thus far?

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Q: What is the most memorable part of the production process?

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