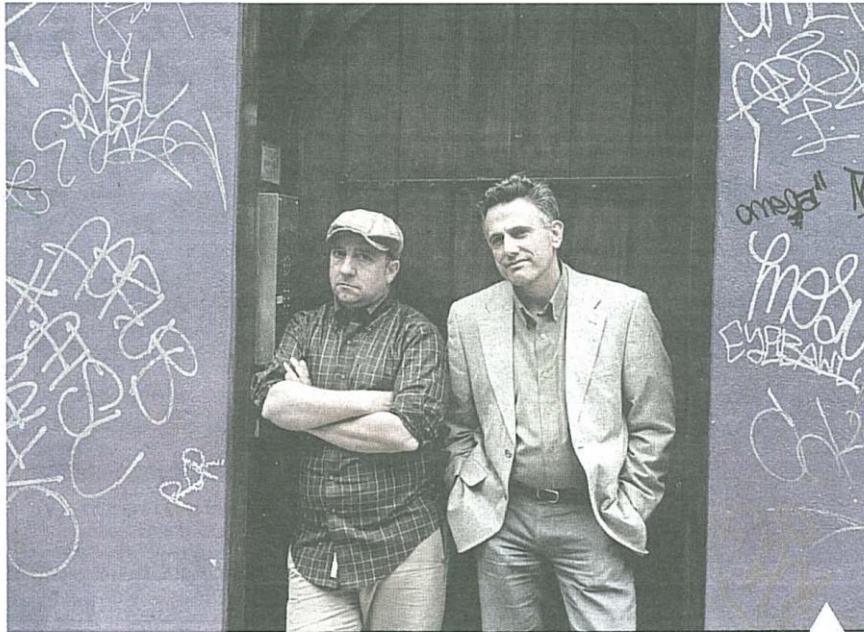


May 6-12, 2009

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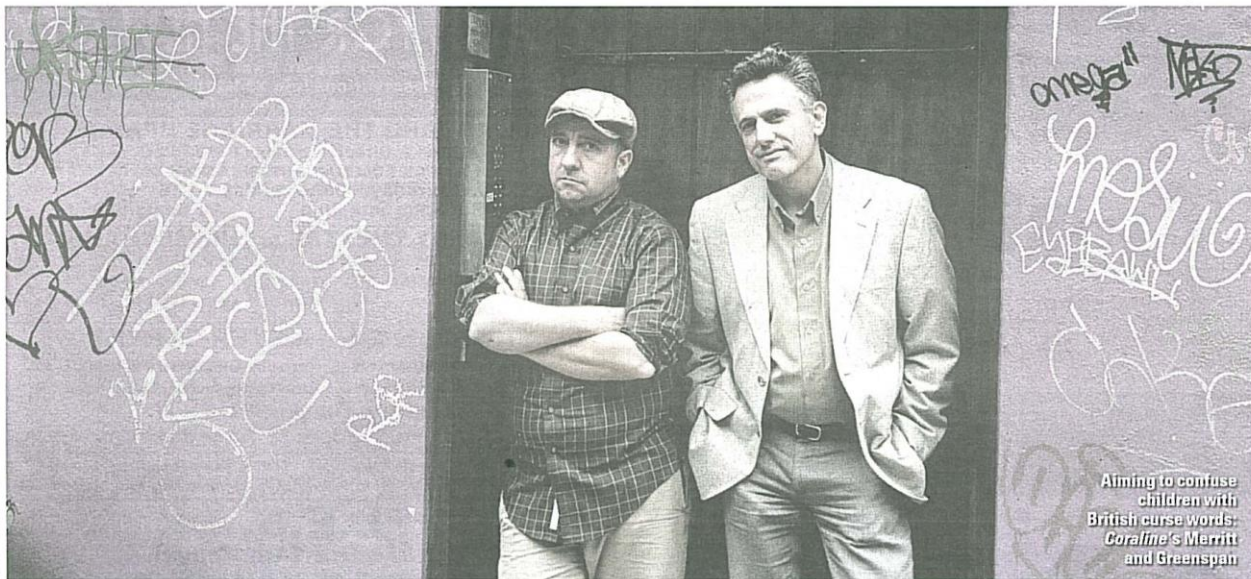
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Aiming to confuse children with British curse words: *Coraline's* Merritt and Greenspan

Daniel S. Neuman

Two Characters in Search of a Theater Song

Cue the crazy piano! Stephin Merritt and David Greenspan conjure an unusual tuner.

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

"When I am dictator," intones Stephin Merritt in his distinctive dour baritone, "compulsive homosexual-ity will remove the problem of children. Soon, I will be dictator. Until then, small children should not come to *Coraline*."

Merritt—the pop genius behind the Magnetic Fields and numberless side projects (the Gothic Archies, the 6ths, the Three Terrors, etc.)—has supplied music and lyrics for an adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*. Gaiman's book concerns a plucky nine-year-old girl, mired in suburbia. One day, she steps through a door in her apartment and discovers a seductive and terrifying world on the other side—dogs, cats, mice, rats, and animate toys aid and menace her. But please don't confuse this *Coraline*, which begins May 7 at the Lucille Lortel Theatre, with a kiddie show.

MCC, which is producing the piece, recommends it for children aged eight and up, but Merritt hopes the crowd will skew older: "I had a fantasy of doing *Coraline* entirely naked, so there would be no children in the audience." At present, the actors are clothed, and Merritt has excised the American curse words he originally added (a nod to kiddie sensibilities). Yet removing them so annoyed him that "I put British swear words in where they're totally gratuitous: 'Bigger all.' 'Sod off.'" And Merritt, who acquired the theatrical rights some years ago,

chose some distinctly adult collaborators. He hired cult playwright David Greenspan to write the book and Leigh Silverman, whose résumé includes nary a children's show, to direct. Together, they selected the 55-year-old Jayne Houdyshell to play little Coraline. Greenspan, no stranger to drag roles, is slotted in as Coraline's Other Mother, a demon entity in an apron.

Merritt is no demon, yet he's known for sourness—if not outright misanthropy. Ten years ago, he told the *Voice*: "I have a low voice and a sad facial expression, and I'm not enthusiastic about anything... Almost everyone in California thinks I hate them." This makes him an uneasy fit for musical theater—that milieu of compulsory smiles and jazz hands. During a recent rehearsal, his expression ranged from doleful to grim, though he did grin when Greenspan yodeled through a climactic number. "I heard only the mistakes," Merritt says. "I know exactly how many songs were too slow, and who sang a wrong note when, and that's all I heard." He marvels at Silverman's ebullience: "She begins every comment with a compliment," he says, "whereas my interpersonal communication is primarily in the vein of commiseration."

Coraline's song lyrics should delight any Merritt fan.

Yet Merritt is uncharacteristically enthusiastic about *Coraline*. Despite his reputation as a difficult interviewee, he's charming and wonderfully patient during a breakfast chat about the project. Greenspan notes that Merritt is not really a grouch in rehearsal, either: "He laughs a lot; he smiles a lot. He's constantly working on refining the lyrics or changing the music." Perhaps this good mood owes to the excitement of *Coraline's* incipient opening. Its development has comprised four years, three

workshops, and countless songs. For a new musical, this timescale is brief, but for someone accustomed to making records, it must seem endless. Yet Merritt doesn't regret it: "I don't think it's frustrating," he says. "It's too fun to be frustrating. If it weren't fun, it would be perfectly maddening." Indeed, he has celebrated the experience with the *Coraline* song "Theater Is Fun!" Sample lyrics: "You simply stand upon a stage, and that is Art/Deliver one line, and it's a 'part' / And if you don't know your line by heart? / Read your sleeve!"

It's odd that Merritt hasn't written a musical sooner. He's adapted three Chinese operas in collaboration with director Chen Shi-zheng, yet *Coraline* represents his first more or less original musical. Since the earliest Magnetic Fields albums, critics have drawn comparisons between Merritt's songwriting and that of Cole Porter and Irving Berlin (after whom Merritt has named his Chihuahua). So it seemed only a matter of time before he would imitate those icons and write for the stage. "I have a very large collection of musicals on DVD," Merritt says. "I think most of them are terrible, really, and they're radically similar, which I like—it's very difficult to be original in pop, but it's practically impossible not to be original in a musical."

But when it came time to choose source material, Merritt picked the Gaiman book largely for its familiarity. "I was raised by a hippie mother. I did not have a normal childhood," he says. "Sometimes, I would make friends with the local fauna and go to their suburban tract homes and meet their two parents who had finite hair length, and they were the strangest people I'd ever met." Though he maintains he had "a perfectly good childhood," the story of a lonely child opening a door and finding another world attracted him.

Like Gaiman's book, Merritt's instrumentation draws on both the everyday and

the otherworldly. Merritt has long experimented with unusual instruments—his albums include a ukulele, tuba, Slinky, and, most recently, a ghuzeng (a Chinese zither). But he's composed *Coraline* for a six-piano orchestra, played by one musician. (Some 20 other pianos will litter the stage.) *Coraline's* songs are accompanied on a toy piano, those of her parents and adult neighbors on a grand piano, and those in the other world on a prepared piano. The prepared piano, developed by John Cage, is a piano whose strings have been kitted out with all manner of detritus—here, the elements include screws, rubber erasers, playing cards, pipe cleaners, and sleigh bells. "By putting small objects between the strings, you change not the pitch but the timbre of each individual note—it sounds like 88 people playing different small percussion instruments," explains Merritt. The auditory result is uncanny, lending even the simplest tune the feeling of an eldritch lullaby.

The song lyrics should delight any Merritt fan. They feature his characteristic elegance and dour, as well as an array of shimmering multisyllable rhymes: *terrier/merrier/derriere* is a favorite. Greenspan notes, "There's a melancholy element to a lot of his music that's quite poignant and touching." Yet other songs are divinely silly. One number proclaims: "We are your toys / We make a lot! Of! Noise! / What we enjoy's / Making a lot! Of! Noise!" And for a man who proclaims a dislike of children, the valedictory song, a hymn to Coraline, is unaccountably tender: A group of mice sing our heroine to sleep with the maxim, "Playing/Keep chasing your tale." In fact, Merritt ultimately confesses that he doesn't mind too terribly much if kids come to see his musical after all.

"Some children are going to demand to come and see *Coraline*," he says with only mild resignation. "Though they'll have to wear stilts to do it."