

# MAKING A GRAPHIC NOVEL SING

BY DANIELLE WARD,  
LITERARY  
MANAGER

**THREE INCREDIBLY TALENTED WOMEN** are behind the creation of the musical *Fun Home*. The story originated from Alison Bechdel, an outspoken lesbian who established herself as an acclaimed illustrator and memoirist. In 2006, she published the graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* which this musical was based on. Playwright Lisa Kron (who you might recognize from San Diego REP's production of *In the Wake* or Diversionary Theatre's *Well* and *2.5 Minute Ride*) wrote the book and lyrics in collaboration with music composer/arranger Jeanine Tesori. Tesori's work has also been celebrated in San Diego, including *Violet* at San Diego REP, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* at La Jolla Playhouse and Broadway San Diego, and *Shrek, the Musical* at Broadway San Diego and Moonlight. The powerhouse team of Kron and Tesori have the distinction of being the first all-woman team to receive the Tony Awards for Best Original Score, Best Book, and Best Musical for *Fun Home*.

So what was the recipe for such success? First thing: a connection to the material "I remember when Lisa brought this book to my attention, I was really affected by it." Tesori said in a creative conversation with Kron and Bechdel, "I grew up during this time and I had a very complicated family myself; I thought there's something in me, even at 8 or 9 years old, that was observing our life in order to use it for something. It turned out to be this musical... I do feel in a way, if I don't write another thing, it would be enough, and that is an incredible feeling to have."

The other things you need are: time and a willingness to get to the heart of the story. In writing the graphic novel, Bechdel noted, "It was such a huge project: six or seven years of drawing and excavating. It was sort of like living in a trance. I had to do everything I could to figure it all out."

Add to that an over five-year gestation process for the musical that included multiple workshops and readings. Kron said in an interview "We lived and breathed Alison's story so that we could make it our own. Adaptation is so tricky. You can't just translate one form into another; you have to make a parallel work that has its own originating impulse. You want to achieve the same emotional effect as the original work, but you have to do it using completely different means, and in many cases, completely invented content."

As the process went on, the musical creators moved from a closely matched design studio setting with illustrations from Bechdel's book on display throughout the show to the more theatrical analogy of Bechdel's emotionally expansive memoir you see today. "They went through more iterations and drafts than I think I've ever seen a musical go through," said Oskar Eustis, the Artistic Director at the Public Theatre. And they worked right up to end to get things just right.

"WHEN THEY SENT ME A SCRIPT AND A SOUNDTRACK. I WAS DEEPLY MOVED. THAT FIRST MOMENT OF HEARING IT: I JUST FELT IT WAS THIS GREAT GIFT. I FELT SEEN ... I THINK THERE SHOULD BE A KIND OF THERAPY WHERE PEOPLE HIRE PLAYWRIGHTS AND COMPOSERS TO MAKE MUSICAL THEATRE OF THEIR SAD CHILDHOODS." -Alison Bechdel *The Guardian*

Adapting a graphic novel into a musical might not initially seem like a natural fit. As Tesori initially noted, "I couldn't imagine how you turn this book into a musical and that's why I wanted to do it." But Bechdel said comics and musicals do have something in common. "It strikes me they can share a weirdly direct route to the human heart. In a musical, you have drama and music. In comics, writing and pictures. They operate differently, but with the same power."

And *Fun Home*, in particular, offered a wonderful source for a musical. Kron explained: "There's a deep river of yearning that flows through Alison's book that made it ripe for translation into the musical form. This is a family that is profoundly alienated from their own powerful emotions. But because music is such an efficient emotional delivery system, we could use it to convey the oceans of feeling swirling



LEFT TO RIGHT: LISA KRON AND JEANINE TESORI

below the surface of this checked-out family at the same time the dialogue and lyrics are showing us how little access they have to any of that feeling."

While gay characters have become more main stream in theater since the 1960s, there hasn't been as much focus on lesbian narratives. So getting those elements right was another important challenge for this creative team. Kron recalled their process of writing "Ring of Keys," a song about the first time young Alison saw a butch lesbian. "In mainstream culture, the way that butchness has often been expressed is as a stock character of ridicule. I was very worried about how we would put this story and that character and specifically that moment onstage without triggering that ridicule, that sort of reflexive response."

But it seems they found a way into this story in an authentic, respectful, and surprisingly universal way. "When we did this show at The Public," Kron recalls, "audience members sought me out on several occasions to say to me, 'This show is so much bigger than a story about a lesbian.' At some point I thought, actually, this show is exactly the size of a lesbian story. I think what got bigger for these people who talked to me was their sense of the world. If you've mostly encountered lesbians as a punch line, how could you imagine one could be a protagonist? How

could you believe that this type of person might be human enough to serve as a prism for a universal story? Conversely, I talked to young queer people who had come to the show to see themselves reflected in the gay characters on stage, and found themselves connecting with Helen Bechdel, the shattered wife, which led them to an unexpected feeling of connection with the older straight married lady from New Jersey sitting next to them....The conundrum of being human is that our experience of the world is inevitably limited by the boundaries of our own consciousness, and theater is where we go to get around that limitation."

# THE BECHDEL TEST

In 1983, after Alison Bechdel went to college, she created the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This funny, knowing strip about a gang of more-or-less radical lesbians in which Bechdel appears as a character called Mo has run for over two decades.

It was in *Dykes to Watch Out For* that the rule — which later became known as The Bechdel Test — first appeared in 1985. She credits the rule she made famous in her strip to her friend Liz Wallace, who proclaimed, "I'll only see a movie if it has at least two women in it who talk to each other about something besides a man." ("Pretty strict," says the second woman in the comic. "No kidding," says the first. "The last movie I was able to see was *Alien*...").

Since then, The Bechdel Test (aka Bechdel-Wallace Test) has become widely known and has been expanded from its original purpose—a cultural barometer that shows how rare genuine female interaction is in film—and has since been applied to assess the overall lack of female focused television shows, books, and plays. Bechdel recently chimed in to say: "I'm very happy my name is associated with it. The culture needs it right now."



ALISON BECHDEL COURTESY OF MICHAEL SHARKEY