

# Old Hickory, rocking out, in ‘Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson’ at SpeakEasy

By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    OCTOBER 20, 2012



DEIDRE SCHOO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alex Timbers (left) wrote the book for “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson,” and Michael Friedman (they are photographed in New York) the music and lyrics. Gus Curry (below) plays Jackson in the musical being produced by SpeakEasy Stage Company.

“I’m Andrew Jackson, and I approve this message.”

The title character in “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” does not actually say that. But given how close this gonzo emo-rock musical comes to today’s political realities, he might as well.

“Bloody Bloody” dramatizes Jackson’s rise to the White House while featuring

populist rhetoric against the banks and the courts, the English and the Spanish. It asserts the will of the people against the Eastern elite. There’s even a profane shot at a New England congressional delegation that prefers raising taxes — and playing polo! — to defending our borders.

“Those lines, if you take out the cursing and take out some of the comedy, those are lines you are literally hearing now,” composer and lyricist Michael Friedman says. “What’s amazing is, if you just talk about the way America votes, you are talking about every election cycle, and it’s sort of horrifying.”

He laughs, but with election news, spin, and attack ads filling the airwaves, theatergoers may find comic shocks of recognition in the show, which Friedman, 37, penned with book writer Alex Timbers.

SpeakEasy Stage Company's production of the musical is in previews at the Boston Center for the Arts.

"We started writing 'Bloody Bloody' during the [George W.] Bush administration," Friedman says. "At that moment, to most people, Andrew Jackson seemed like very much a 'W' type, kind of a cowboy and a maverick, like the uneducated guy who took on the system and was proud of that. At that time, that was how most people saw the show."

The musical, peppered with anachronisms, was first workshopped at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2006. Directed by Timbers, it premiered in Los Angeles in 2008 and opened at New York's Public Theater the following year. By the time it moved to Broadway in September 2010, Jackson's populist fire and anti-elitist positions also reminded many of the Tea Party movement.

While Friedman leans left, he says the show was not written to any political agenda.

"The moment when Jackson realizes suddenly that the people who loved him so much are now harping on his every move, that feels so much like Obama right now," Friedman says. "I think he's a pretty terrific president in an impossible situation. But that's the thing: Being president is literally an impossible job. . . . Especially if you have two terms, you cannot please everyone. In fact, you will end up displeasing everyone. That's to me what rings truest."

Friedman, who lives in New York, is speaking by Skype from the kitchen of a loft in Hong Kong, where he's spending three weeks as an artist in residence at the Spring Workshop arts center. The worst part of being in Hong Kong is being unable to participate in the campaign, he says. The best part is getting away from what he calls the "insane" election media cycle: "It's like, Elizabeth Warren, at 11 she's up, and at 11:23 she's down. It's really upsetting."

Jackson, nicknamed Old Hickory, was already in his 60s when he became the nation's seventh president, an office he held from 1829-37. But the show's Jackson, played at SpeakEasy by Gus Curry, is a robust young man with rock-star charisma. He's not afraid of making tough and frequently wrongheaded decisions, which include brutalizing Native American tribes and pushing them off their land.

Director Paul Melone, who is also SpeakEasy's general manager, hears the contemporary echoes in the musical.

"The writers put in these segments that are very much like 21st-century American political advertisements," Melone says, "with direct address to the audience by these good, honest, hard-working Americans, and they talk about the problems facing this country and the tough times ahead, and there's something about the language that is so ingrained now in our political discourse."

According to Friedman, Jackson “invented so many of the ways in which we look at politics, so many of the ways, certainly, in which we campaign.”

The show closes with “Hunters of Kentucky,” a paeon to then-General Jackson’s leadership in the Battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. It later became his campaign song.

Of course, the music that “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson” is known for is the emo-rock roar that here animates a cast of 13, at least five of whom will play instruments, along with a four-piece rock combo.

Friedman admits he was too old to be an emo kid, his high school years having coincided with grunge and the rise and fall of Nirvana. But his songs for the show were inspired by way of immersion in bands such as Dashboard Confessional, Fall Out Boy, and Weezer. Why emo? Because, Friedman says, it was right for Jackson and his times.

“I realized what I was writing in the usual way — after I write it,” he says. “And I realized this is a show about the coming of age of America. As Manifest Destiny becomes clear, and the country comes out of the War of 1812, it’s clear the country is going to last. It’s obvious the country is going to be a world power. . . . This is the moment when America gets through its teenage years and has to reckon with adulthood.”

Friedman’s career was shaped by a musical composition class with Elizabeth Swados that he took as a Harvard undergraduate. But it was an “astonishing . . . truly formative” history class on Jacksonian America with the late William Gienapp that eventually led to “Bloody Bloody,” he says.

Friedman graduated from Harvard in 1997. Years later, a mutual friend suggested that he try an artistic “blind date” with Timbers. They met in an East Village cafe in 2005 and enjoyed their conversation, but at first it wasn’t clear whether any work would result. Then, about 45 minutes in, Timbers mentioned Jackson, Friedman mentioned the Harvard class, and they were off and running.

“By the time we were done with coffee, we were as far as an emo-rock Andrew Jackson show,” Friedman says. “We were strangely far down the road.”

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