

News

Jazzed Over the New

By [Gerard Raymond](#) | Posted April 19, 2006, midnightShare: [👍](#) [🐦](#) [📌](#) [✉](#)

The raunchy, adorable puppets of Avenue Q may seem worlds apart from the prisoner abuse of Abu Ghraib, but director Jason Moore sees a similarity between his career-making musical and Guardians, a new play he is directing Off-Broadway at the Culture Project. "Both shows push people's buttons—in very different ways, certainly," says Moore. "It's always fun to work on daring material."

Guardians, a two-hander by Peter Morris, was inspired by the publication of shocking images of prisoner abuse and torture in Iraq. One of the characters is a woman who participated in grisly photo shoots at the notorious prison; the other is an English journalist involved in the publication of fake torture photos in a British tabloid. "It's a play about big ideas—about the nature of war, the difference between men and women, and the difference between the British and Americans," Moore explains.

Morris, who is American but does most of his work in London, offers a hypothesis in the play for why the photos were taken and published, placing the incidents in the broader context of war and the manifestation of power and dominance. The play is bold and compelling, but also mordantly funny. "It's like the song 'Everyone's a Little Bit Racist' in Avenue Q," Moore points out. "It draws a line in the sand, and people end up on different sides. I think that's what theatre should do: challenge as well as entertain."

A native of Arkansas, Moore graduated from Chicago's Northwestern University in 1993. He started off as a film major, transferred to the theatre department, and eventually moved to the university's performance studies program—"specifically, the adaptation of literature for the theatre," he says. His teachers, Frank Galati and Mary Zimmerman, are well-known for their narrative-based theatre work, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Metamorphoses*, respectively. Following graduation, Moore moved to Los Angeles to pursue film, but it was there he got his first break in theatre: as resident director for Galati's production of the musical *Ragtime*. "It was based on a book—the kind of adaptation work I had done before," Moore says.

Resident directors—also called associate directors—are a relatively recent phenomenon on Broadway. The model comes from Britain, where the stage manager is responsible only for technical aspects of the production, and the resident director looks after the acting, keeping it fresh during long runs. With the advent of Cameron Mackintosh-produced musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, resident directors started becoming a regular part of American productions. Moore, for example, was resident director for the national tour of *Ragtime*, but when producer Garth Drabinsky and his company, Livent, went through financial difficulties, Moore lost his job and moved to the East Coast.

"So I arrived in New York—the classic move, without a job and on unemployment," he recalls. While in the nation's theatre capital, the young director embarked, somewhat unexpectedly, on a television career; he has since directed episodes of *Dawson's Creek*, *One Tree Hill*, and *Everwood*. "It was a great diversion, and I like to mix things up a bit," he says. In 1999, Moore got a job as resident director of Broadway's long-running *Les Misérables*, another work adapted from literature. With the musical due to return to Broadway this fall, he is now working with casting director Tara Rubin and helping to set up the new production. "I love the show," he says, "but it's a passing-of-the-torch moment because there's going to be some design changes, and [original directors] John Caird and maybe Trevor Nunn are coming back to work on it, so it's the perfect moment to look for someone else to take over the show. After it's cast, my time is bittersweetly over."

With *Les Miz* helping to pay the rent, Moore could focus on what he loves best: new work. In 2000,

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Rattlestick Theater's successful Off-Broadway production of Buddy Thomas' *The Crumple Zone*, starring Mario Cantone, became Moore's calling card. "It was a zany, wacky, heightened comedy that was supposed to run for eight weeks but ended up running six months," he recalls. "I was able to get an agent based on that." That production led to his involvement with *Avenue Q*, which he first directed at Off-Broadway's Vineyard Theatre in 2003 and for which he received a Tony nomination for best director of a musical the following year.

"I had never worked with puppets before. That was one of the things that made it so attractive to work on, because you sort of throw all the rules out of the window," Moore explains. "The big part of it is finding the balance between not letting the puppeteer be neutral but also not letting the actor overpower the puppet, which cannot change expression. A lot of puppeteers choose their art because they do get to stand underneath or behind scenery, and so we found that a lot of wonderful and incredibly talented career puppeteers didn't have the presence to fill a Broadway stage. At the same time, finding actors who are willing to take a step back and be behind the puppet—and also have the skill to manipulate it—has been very difficult."

Doors opened quickly for Moore after the quirky downtown musical became a critical and popular hit. Looking back, he credits his bread-and-butter job as resident director for easing the leap to Broadway: "I feel very thankful that I knew how the beast moved. It doesn't teach you how to direct it, but it gave me a certain kind of confidence to be able to say, 'Okay, I know why we are in overtime and why it's costing so much.'" He next directed the Broadway production of *Steel Magnolias* because the play, he says, "had a place in my heart": Moore had a brother who died young, and the director felt a kinship with the play's Southern setting. He is slated to direct the upcoming *Shrek: The Musical* and is working with composer Jeanine Tesori and book writer-lyricist David Lindsay-Abaire on the project. "I get really jazzed working with writers, and I like the process of shaping something," says Moore.

With *Guardians*, however, Moore first encountered Morris' finished script after the play had received a top award at last summer's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. "I haven't been this thrilled about a writer in a really long time," he says. "It's complex and difficult and it's highly theatrical. Two side-by-side monologues directed at the audience—no puppets, no hair, no music." The play's dynamic is similar to standup comedy, he explains: "It's such a vulnerable thing for the actor to have to look directly at the audience and engage them, like a conversation. The trick is to figure out how to make the play get to where it needs to go, but you can't deny the fact that the audience may or may not be going with you. It's basically like getting a new scene partner or a new understudy who gives a completely different performance every night. It's an adrenaline rush for the actor to get up there and not be sure what's coming next."

For himself, too, Moore is on the lookout for stimulating challenges. At 35, with *Avenue Q* nearing the end of its third year on Broadway, a London production opening in June in the West End, and a national tour scheduled for next spring, he's not resting on his laurels. For someone interested in all theatrical genres as well as screens large and small, the field is wide open. For example, he was briefly involved in a proposed made-for-TV version of the Alan Menken-Stephen Schwartz musical *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, but the project proved too costly to produce and is currently shelved. Moore is now setting up a feature film but says he can't divulge details.

"What keeps me going is always something that has a new original voice," he says. "Directors are only as good as the writers, and so it's finding writers that have things to say. And that can come in so many different ways—a lot of times the best stories are the ones that defy categorization."



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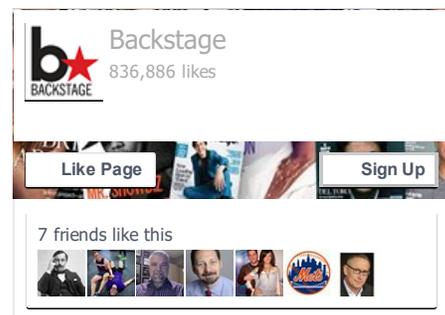
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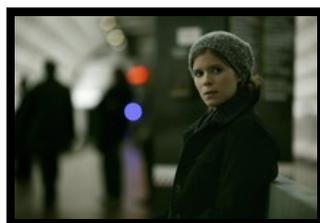
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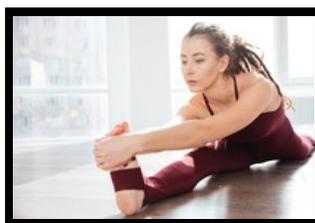
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