

THE EXCLUSIVE MAGAZINE FOR, BY AND ABOUT THE RESIDENTS OF WINNETKA

WINNETKA

Living



JULY 2017



Supporting Cast

Meet Jasper Bickers and
the Company of Friends
Behind *Someday*



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Cover Photo by Kate Oelerich Photography



The Bickers Family:
Chaz, Amy,
Max and
Jasper, with
Dillon and
Diva (their
half-time
pets)

Supporting Cast

Backed by Winnetka District 36, his family, and peers, 14-year-old Jasper Bickers brings an entirely original musical to the Washburne Stage

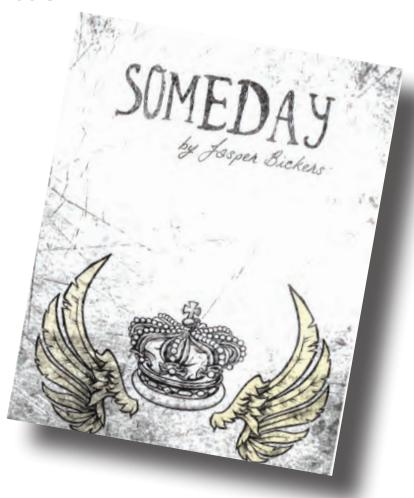
By Diane Bobis | Photos by Kate Oelerich and The Winnetka Public Schools

In the theatrical world, it's called a company: an ensemble of actors, singers, dancers, musicians, directors, stage managers and crew who are bound together by a day-in, day-out collaboration of bringing a story to life.

Last May, 60 students from Washburne's Musical Theatre and Stagecraft classes became not only a bona fide theatre company, but a company of friends, who produced the school's first-ever completely student-run musical that was also scripted and scored by a classmate.

Jasper Bickers was going into 7th grade when he started writing *Someday*, a one-act musical fairytale about Kara, a princess who is forced to make a tough decision that changes everything about her life and her kingdom. When Jasper first put pencil to paper and fingertips to piano, his intention wasn't exactly to produce *Someday* at his middle school. But three months into his draft, inspired by his Washburne "Centerstage" class, he decided to pitch the idea to drama teacher Amy Markos and music teacher Hillary Schroer.

"We've not had a student write the book and fully compose a musical before, though it had been a dream," says Markos, who has taught at Washburne for 17 years. "After taking



a look at the script and music Jasper had written, Hillary and I were convinced we had something tangible to work with – and a student willing to see the project through to completion.” The two teachers, who would become Jasper’s directors and mentors, gave him a writing deadline: the first day of eighth grade.

“Jasper needs all the coaching and prodding of any typical 14-year-old, but not for this,” laughs Jasper’s mom, Amy Bickers, who says Jasper can usually be found in one of two places: at the piano, or in bed with his laptop computer and notation software. She and husband, Chaz, describe their “Jazz,” who was born in Japan, as a boy who was “always curious, always into creative writing, dance and music, and never bored.”

Growing up, Jasper loved going to the theatre with his family (his grandfather, George Coe, had a 50-year career as a stage, film and television actor) and putting on comedy and magic shows with his older brother Max and cousin Rocco. Today he pores over books of Stephen Sondheim lyrics, reads every script and listens to every score he can get his hands on. And sometimes when he’s supposed to be doing other things – like washing the dishes.

“Over the course of writing *Someday*, I read around 100 different musicals and plays and listened to 30-odd cast albums,” says Jasper. His main musical theatre inspiration is Sondheim, who he calls the “greatest lyricist of the 20th century – quite possibly ever.” His work is also shaped by the examples of Jason Robert Brown (*Parade*), Stephen Schwartz (*Wicked*), Andrew Lloyd Weber, and *Heathers* by Larry O’Keefe (which largely influenced *Someday*’s pop/rock orchestration).

It would take Jasper just over one year to write the score and libretto for *Someday*, plus six months more to complete the orchestrations. The biggest challenges he faced: scoring for the different instruments and getting the script edited down to 16 scenes, 25 musical numbers, and an hour and 15 minutes in length.

“Jasper consistently took feedback and edited his work in response,” explains Markos. “Hillary and I approached working with him as a true artistic collaborator, as his maturity, humility and dedication allowed him to see past any middle school ego for the sake of the project as a whole.”

According to his parents, Jasper didn’t talk a lot about his work, and they didn’t always know exactly what he was up to. But “he was always chipping away at what was needed, incrementally adjusting and tweaking, and throwing things out. He relishes the arrangements and the challenge of piecing it all together,” says Chaz.

When asked how he found ways to hone his craft at such a young age, Jasper says his main opportunity to learn how to write came from reading – quite a bit. As for the composing, he used videos and books to learn music theory and also taught himself how to use notation software he found online.

He and his parents also credit the classical violin training he received through District 36’s Suzuki program, and living in a community that has so many resources, opportunities and great teachers. “We’ve always encouraged Jasper and Max to follow their passions and the Winnetka schools have a wonderful, collaborative approach that allows kids to be creators,” says Amy. “There’s a lot of latitude and choice, and teachers have always supported both our boys in finding their own ways to express and run with their ideas. It is so powerful.”



Ashley Zabel, Mia Puljic, Alison Carolus, and Isabella Baratta as dancers in “Noble’s Dance”



Mia Hales as Kara and Jasper Bickers as Baron during “Baron’s Waltz (Everything Is Going Fine)”



Jasper with Grace Astolfi as the Grand Chancellor, Amelia Roselli as Epulsa, Kate Frohling as Rose, Katie Klaskin as Scarlet, and Grace McCaffery as Ella in “Finale”



Jasper with
older brother
Max, a junior at
New Trier who
enjoys fencing,
computer science
and volunteering
at the Center
for Economic
Progress

"It's truly rewarding to see a student finding joy in doing what he or she loves," says Schroer. "Our district encourages us to find new ways to give voice to our students, and this was an obvious venue to let student-led learning be front and center. Jasper is very lucky to find, at a young age, a field of study that he is gifted in and passionate about. Many adults have still not found that intersection."

According to Markos, when Jasper's Musical Theatre and Stagecraft peers got their first read of *Someday* last winter, they were equally astonished. "One student asked three times to confirm that a fellow student his own age wrote it," she says. "They were committed to the show from the get-go."

The cast and crew worked together for 24 weeks, with the live instrumentalists coming in during the final six – and all with surprisingly little drama. "I feel honored and thankful for being a cast member of *Someday*," says 14-year-old Dani Israelov, who played one of the three angel narrators. "Singing and acting in another student's musical made it relatable and inspiring. The show is extremely sacred to me and the company."

Julie Oelerich, 14, who played the witch, Epulsa, says the major challenge the company overcame was not having the references of a famous production that had already been played. "We had to create everything from scratch," she explains. "I am most proud of the fact that we were able to perform a completely new piece of theatre and tell a brand new story to our audiences."

"All of the students involved in the performance took pride in the production," says Schroer. "Jasper wrote the play and music, but each student took ownership of their part and role in helping his musical come to life. By the time the curtain went down, I think all of the students realized they were a part of something much bigger than themselves."

Iris Ely, who played angel narrator Rose and also played piano in the orchestra, has known Jasper since the summer before 5th grade. His close friend and trusted collaborator, Iris helped Jasper brainstorm, read and re-read his story and music during study breaks, in the hallways and on the bus. "I think 'Rising' is my favorite song Jasper composed," she says. "It has a beautiful message: No one can stop you from being you and reaching your goals."

For Jasper, seeing his friends up on stage performing his script and singing his songs could only be described as "surreal." "It's odd to see something that only existed in your head transfer into reality," he explains. "I love the cast and crew of students for all the work they have done to create our full-fledged production. And Amy Markos and Hillary Schroer were incredibly supportive of me during every step of the process and I cannot thank them enough. Finally, the support I got from the administration of District 36 makes me very grateful I live in a place and go to a school where things like *Someday* are possible."

Katie Klaskin, 14 and angel narrator Scarlet, says her takeaway from working with the support and guidance of her teachers and peers on *Someday* is this: "You can accomplish anything at any age – and no dream is too far-fetched."

Since graduating from Washburne, Jasper has started composing a string quartet piece for Dr. Zachary Ebin's *The Silent Voices Project*. This fall he is excited to join Max at New Trier and participate in the school's theatre and music programs. And some day, we just may see Jasper Bickers' work on the Great White Way, following in the footlights of his late grandfather. "My ultimate goal is to have a show on Broadway," says the already accomplished writer and composer. "Whether that will happen or not – well, who knows. But I can definitely tell you that I will try."

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