



# BROADWAY ASIA

## WITH JOHN RANDO + MARC ROUTH

INTERVIEWED BY YUE LIU + HOWARD SHERMAN

### JOHN RANDO

*As musicals such as Rent and Hairspray attract big audiences in Beijing and beyond, new opportunities are opening up for American theatre artists to create work in China.*

*Over the last two years, Tony Award-winning director **John Rando** worked with Broadway Asia on a large-scale musical for Chinese audiences. Jay Chou's *The Secret* is based on a 2007 film of the same name that was written by, directed by, and starred Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou. Broadway Asia hired Rando and bookwriter Marc Acito to adapt the film for the stage—using Chou's pre-existing song catalogue—for production in Chinese, to play in China.*

*SDC Journal covered the project in two related interviews. Before departing for production rehearsals in China, **John Rando** met with Howard Sherman to describe the origin of the project, how he approached its development, and what he was expecting once rehearsals began. Yue Liu spoke with Broadway Asia's Marc Routh, who discussed the logistics and viewpoint from the producer's end.*

**HOWARD SHERMAN** | How were you approached about this project?

**JOHN RANDO** | The key player in this whole theatrical relationship with China is Broadway Asia, which is run by Marc Routh and Simone Genatt. They are two very exciting producers who for many years have been working overseas in Asia, primarily in China, and are deeply familiar with the way things work there and how productions happen.

About five or six years ago, Marc invited me to help develop a production over in China of an American version of *The Peony Pavilion*, a classic Chinese opera. We went there to

try to turn it into a Broadway musical. Maury Yeston was writing the music. After a workshop in China, *The Peony Pavilion* never came to fruition, but my appetite for working in China had been whetted.

For Jay Chou's *The Secret*, Broadway Asia created a relationship with GBE, a film company that has some 20 films under their belt. They're an excellent film company and they were ready to branch out into musical theatre. They partnered with Broadway Asia to create nine musicals, including some big titles, like *Peter Pan* and *Kung Fu Panda*.

Marc [Routh] asked me about this particular project and asked if I knew Jay Chou's music. I said no. Jay Chou is also an actor. He's in *The Green Hornet* and *Now You See Me 2*.

I listened to his music. I was completely compelled by it. I thought, "This is really cool music, this is smart stuff." I learned that he was originally a classical pianist. He's a consummate musician as well as composer.

Then I saw the film *The Secret*. The film is a sweet, touching romantic comedy. I told Marc, "I think it's worth a try. Let's see what we can do."

This all happened very quickly. It's one of the fastest musicals I've ever done. Marc [Routh] hired a playwright, Marc Acito, to do the book. Marc's initial task was to take the story from the film and figure out how Jay's songs could fit. In November 2015, there was an initial script.

The way we [worked] was [that] Marc got all the lyrics translated into English. He had the screenplay, but essentially what he had was the subtitles from the film, and he created the book in English. The initial song translations were very literal, so they were almost impossible, at times, to understand. Since then, we've learned how to translate and make them make sense.

*The Secret* takes place in a high school. It's senior year, which is like our freshman college year for China. It's a story about a teen boy, Xianglun, who's spending his senior year where his father teaches. He had been in another school, but his mother passed away, and he has come back home. He's a brilliant pianist, but he's struggling with the loss of his mother. It's basically a boy-meets-girl [story]: he meets a girl under an old piano at school and falls in love. Only trouble is he doesn't know that she died 20 years earlier from an asthma attack. It's very sweet, romantic, funny, and very touching.

The film has no songs, just a theme song and classical piano pieces. We're doing this interesting thing where we've created essentially a jukebox musical. We've taken songs from Jay's catalogue, taken his film's plot and characters, and smashed these two things together. This is stuff that we do here in the U.S. all the time; this is the first time this has ever happened in China. They're deeply excited about it, especially the youth.

We had our first trip to China in January 2016. We collaborated with casting agents who put together a cast. The actors that we initially had all came from two prominent musical theatre acting schools in Shanghai. The energy that these kids have is really remarkable, especially in terms of the musical theatre.

While I was there, some of the students were working on a production of *Rent*. They were dying to know what *Hamilton* was like. They knew many American shows that had opened in recent years. Some of them have visited, others have learned just through CDs and through the internet. To them, the American catalogue and American musical theatre is really the standard.

**HOWARD** | Is Jay Chou involved?

**JOHN** | He has approval over everything we do [and] his manager, Mr. Jun Rong Zhang, is one of the major producers.

I had two weeks for the first reading. We knew that this first reading was not a guarantee that [a production] was going to happen. It was a reading, and we were just seeing what we had.

I sat down in first rehearsal, exhausted and jet-lagged. Marc Acito and I had just arrived. The cast had been working [for] a week before we got there, just to get the music going. I said, "You know, what would be really helpful right now is if you just sang every song, sang the entire story, what you've learned. I just want to hear it." So they sat down and sang it. I started to notice, "Oh, there are the actors singing the song, but then off on the side, the other actors are all singing these songs. What is that?" It kept going. I realized in that moment that this truly is *popular music*. These are twentysomethings, early twentysomethings. I recognized that they love this guy; they love this music.

Instantly, we started to make changes. Because we basically followed the story of the film, I said to Marc, "What we need is two plot lines. We need an A plot and a B plot." We just talked about classic musical theatre structure. There was a fantastic secondary couple or love triangle that needed more songs. We put those in place. And by the time these two weeks were done, we had what felt like a pretty strongly structured musical with these amazing songs in it. And funny. And touching.

We presented a reading, after two weeks, to Mr. Zhang. At intermission, he walked up to me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and said, "I can't believe you've done this. I cannot believe this is happening." They immediately started talking about when we [could] do it. So, with Marc and Simone from Broadway Asia, we structured the rest of the year leading up to the rehearsals that begin on November 1. We did another three-week workshop in the late spring where we developed songs and did all the choreography. Then we went back again to do more development work, and casting work, et cetera. This next trip is the *big* trip. That's the calendar.

**HOWARD** | Who else is on the team?

**JOHN** | The set designer is Beowulf Boritt. Costumes is David Woolard. The choreographer, Zach Woodlee, from Los Angeles, was a choreographer for *Glee* and he recently did *Grease Live*. He's a great choreographer and a fun collaborator. Jay's music and Zach are a perfect match.

The challenges of putting up a big musical in China are extraordinary. There is, of course, the issue of not speaking Mandarin. But also what we might be used to is very different over there—simple things, like spike tape, how furniture gets marked on the stage, and other stage management issues.

Those challenges make it also really hard and complicated. Everything takes longer because of translation. You're always translating. You translate forward, translate back, and it keeps going back and forth until finally you arrive at the thought that you think—you hope—is the thought that will help. But that's why I wanted to be there. I like that kind of challenge.

**HOWARD** | Given that you are an American creative team working on a show that is a Chinese story with Chinese music, how much of the process is simply telling the story the American way and hoping that Chinese audiences come with it? And how much of it is about you and Zach, in particular, and Marc, adopting some of the Chinese storytelling stage tradition, even in these 15 years that Western musicals have been seen in China?

**JOHN** | We—Marc and, I think, Zach too—can only do what we know well, and we try to treat it that way. We're taking young artists—because it's primarily a young cast. There are two characters that are older, but everybody else is twentysomething, either fresh out of school [or] still in school. The nice thing about that is that you really can not only work with them but you can mold their technique, mold their performance.

You're trying to create what we have *here*, which are triple threats: singers/dancers/actors. Sometimes the singing is stronger than the dancing; sometimes the acting is stronger than the singing. In so much of the Chinese tradition—prior to, let's say, 15 years ago—many actors were very specialized. *Just* actors. *Just* singers. *Just* dancers. It's only recently—and this is the generation that we're working with—they *are* being trained as triple threats.

Time travel is very common in Chinese story telling. So we had to work hard on making sure our time travel logic was making sense. Also, in our show, there are some things that we need to reference in work with our Chinese counterparts to figure out if we are doing the right thing. For example, there's a high school graduation at the end of the story. What do they do [at a] high school graduation? Do they wear a cap and gown? What do they wear? We learned they wear corsages, so there are some details in terms of everyday life.

What the producers over there are way more interested in is us just making sure we get that normalcy. These are real people. That was a big liberation for us because that allows us to just tell our story.

**HOWARD** | Do you have a Chinese dramaturg or someone in an equivalent role?

**JOHN** | My assistant, Wencong. I rely heavily on him in terms of what Chinese high school life is like. How do the boys talk to the girls?

How do girls talk to boys? What do they do? Since it's a romantic story, we need to know these things. Then, needless to say, our counterpart producers [are] deeply involved in that kind of discussion.

In this particular case, it's remarkably less different than I thought it was going to be, which I'm very happy about. It's basically parents missing or loving their children, the children coming of age and owning their identity as a lover, or their identity as the class clown, and so on. It's a very similar world. This kind of coming-of-age love story can be universal.

**HOWARD** | Would you say that the development of this show is similar to other musicals you've worked on? Beyond the translation issues, have there been other steps you've had to take that make it somewhat different?

**JOHN** | I've been joking a lot; right now, it's easier for me to get a theatre in Beijing than it is to get a theatre in New York City. There's more real estate in China. That's definitely very different. Literally, after the first reading, we essentially had a theatre. How could that be? Here it takes 19 readings and several movie stars later to get yourself a theatre.

That said, the resource material is superb and fun. The music of Jay Chou is completely stageworthy. Many of his songs are stories in themselves. Either they carry tremendous wit—hugely funny songs—or they carry great depth and great passion. Needless to say, that's really helpful in musical theatre.

**HOWARD** | In taking these very well-known pop songs that everybody can sing, using music from the existing source, is the music rearranged or re-orchestrated so that it serves a different emotional need than it might have as a stand-alone song? Do you have that flexibility?

**JOHN** | The simple answer is yes. And it comes from three people. We have Jared Stein, our music supervisor and arranger whose work has been really extraordinary. On top of that is our Chinese conductor, Jiang Chenwa, who I believe to be China's best musical theatre conductor. He has been incredibly helpful in terms of taking what Jay Chou wrote and turning it into theatrical moments. So songs exist as they do in the recordings. Some songs exist in portions but then get integrated with dialogue; some songs begin the way they do but then metamorphose into something that helps us tell a story—whatever that might be, whether it's slowing down, speeding up, or reducing instrumentation from what the ear might originally know. Also on our music team is the incomparable Ethan Popp, our orchestrator.

Jay's songs are sung by female characters [and] ensembles as opposed to just men. Different characters have particular songs. Jay Chou has a song and, translated, it's called "Simple Love." He sings about how crazy the world is and all he really wants is just simple love. That's all he's really looking for: just simple love. It's a very popular song. It's also a song that I really am fond of. It's sweet; it's fun; it's light; it's got something in it.

At the end of the first act, all these relationships—there are four different relationships happening between these high school students—get confused because one of them happens to be a girl from 20 years earlier, and no one can see her.

How this works is that the girl is in this old music room on campus, and this music room is going to be torn down in the present. But back 20 years ago, she finds this antique sheet music called "The Secret" under the piano, and she plays it. And on it, it says, "If you play this music and open your eyes, the first person you will see will be your destiny." So she plays the music and, of course, she moves forward in time and that's when she meets the boy, Xianglun. The music is the conduit through which time travels and, essentially, music is the force that brings these two lovers together. It's so music theatre...so perfect.

So, backtracking a little bit. "Simple Love," the song that I was talking about. At the height of the drama, where they're all going crazy, I said, "It'd be hilarious—wouldn't it be brilliant if they start singing 'Simple Love' right now? They're arguing, they're arguing, and then at the chorus, they all unify and sing 'Simple Love.' I think it'll be really fun."

Early on in the first reading, we were working on it and then again later in the lab. No one was around—just the five actors, myself, the music people, and Zach. Then we did it for the first time in front of other actors and some of the producers, and it was hysterically funny. [We thought,] "Oh my god, that's a great way to use that song at this moment, and use it contrary to what anyone would imagine it be." That kind of thinking, that kind of surprise—"Oh, they're using that song to do *that*"—will be exciting for fans of Jay's music. It's not dissimilar to the fans, say, of ABBA, when they saw *Mamma Mia*: "Oh, I never dreamed it could be done like that." So there are maybe three or four moments like that in the show where we're using these popular songs in ways that no one ever dreamed of.

One of [Jay Chou's] biggest rock 'n' roll hits is a song called "Nunchucks." It's about learning the nunchucks. We couldn't really figure out how to do it, but we knew it had to be in the show. Our comic duo guys play rugby, and we thought, "Oh, god, it would be funny if we

could somehow do a rugby match and use nunchucks during the rugby match."

So we created a competitive environment. The song sounds like they're going to war; it sounds like these two teams. We choreographed a wonderfully hilarious rugby match in which, eventually, one of our underdogs pulls out a pair of nunchucks. But he's terrible, of course; he can't really do it. He's all show and no go. So it's that kind of "contrary to popular belief" use of the songs that, I think, is also surprising to Jay Chou or Chinese audiences.

**HOWARD** | Before you went over for that first reading, did you have actors read the script in English over here?

**JOHN** | No, we didn't have time. The script came to me and then, basically, I gave a few notes, it came back, and then a week later we were on our way. It was really, really crazy. The first time we actually heard the script was in Chinese, and we've *never* heard it in English. We've only heard it in Chinese. We talk about, "Oh, wouldn't it be cool if we could do this in English?" I would argue that the music is very worthy of an American audience. It's such good stuff. This might be a way to bring his music to America.

**HOWARD** | What's the scale of the production? Are you building this for 500-seat houses, 1,000-seat houses, 3,000-seat houses?

**JOHN** | Well, large houses. 1,400, 1,600—that kind of thing. They have to be; there are minimal, minimal small houses for musicals. Many of the theatres have been built in recent years. Again, there's no focal point of theatre in China. For example, in Shanghai, one part of the city has a theatre, and then you have to drive an hour to get to another theatre. It's a big city. There are 26 million people in Shanghai. It's probably the most important theatrical city in China, but the theatres are spread out and not a centralized thing.

The other interesting complication is that, in China, it's a different system for actors. They sign contracts with theatres as opposed to signing contracts with a commercial producer, or with a singular producer, or with a theatre for one show. Here in the United States, an actor might have a contract with the Old Globe Theatre and do a production there for three months, and then sign another deal to do a show at Playmakers, and then come to Broadway, et cetera, and then maybe a yearlong contract on Broadway. Chinese actors, for the most part, sign a contract with the theatre, and they have a three-year contract, or they have a six-year contract. In order to wrestle them free from that contract, independent producers—which



PHOTO: c/o Broadway Asia

is what GBE and Broadway Asia are—have to make a deal with that theatre. So actors don't have managers; they have theatres, and then the theatres set the price, and the theatres also charge for the use of the actor. It can become unbelievably expensive and almost impossible. Finding actors to do these kind of productions—which are, say, a six-month contract or a one-year contract—is complicated and different. We had this issue on our show; we had been working with a very young actor—a couple of them—because we met them through the school. They were seniors when we first started to work with them, and they already had contracts with a theatre in Shanghai.

Essentially, it's like coming out of Juilliard and you don't sign with a manager, you sign with a theatre. Or you sign with a film company, and they have you for so many years.

**HOWARD** | It's the old Hollywood studio system.

**JOHN** | It is exactly like the Hollywood studio system.

**HOWARD** | How much time will you have with the show once it begins its performances?

**JOHN** | We have six weeks of rehearsal. The first week is music and dance only, and then

I arrive, and then we have 12 days of tech, which is basically on a Broadway schedule. But we have a limited preview period; we only have two weeks of previews. [On] a Broadway schedule, we would have three, maybe four weeks. That's hard. That's tricky.

Then it opens, and I [will] have two things in place. I have my associate, who's been with me the whole way, and he will do the maintenance of the show. We also are thinking about hiring a resident director, an American. So we'd have the American version of me, and the Chinese version of me, maintain the show through its first season. What we're waiting on is to see the impact of the show, how much travel it's going to have. We expect it to have a lot of travel. Shows don't last that long in one place. I think there's only one show that's lasted more than a year in a singular city. It's called *Shanghai Bund*. It takes place in Shanghai, and it's about gangsters during the '30s. It's based on a very famous Chinese film. That particular show is the only one I know of that had a year in one place. It's not like Broadway. These shows have to find their audiences. They have to travel to find their audiences.

**HOWARD** | Early in your career you had a Fulbright to study theatre in Italy and Germany. What was that experience, and how does that experience influence the work you're doing now, admittedly in a different country?

**JOHN** | I had studied German and Italian, and I got a degree in humanities—not in theatre. I believed I wanted to be a director but felt I needed a broad-based education. While I was studying—this was in the late '70s, early '80s—part of my process was reading a lot of European theatre journals. There was one called *Teatre Heute—Theatre Today*—a German journal. I would go to the library every month and study and look at the imagery and recognize the directors.

I got completely hooked on what was happening in Europe. Seeing imagery of Mouchkine's work...seeing all this different imagery...Giorgio Strehler's work in Italy... these were people that I admired as a young wannabe director in an academic institution. I had a very good relationship with my German teachers, and they had a very fantastic relationship with a small theatre in Germany. I worked with them and wrote a Fulbright application to study at the University of Freiburg, and at the same time work at this theatre. That has had a lifelong influence on me. Travel and studying the theatre of other cultures and the impact of theatre on culture around the world has always been part of my rubric.

From this, there are two lessons. One is the universality of theatrical language. That "Oh, it's remarkable what plays here can play elsewhere." Also, the *disconnect* of that as well.



PHOTO: c/o Broadway Asia

What plays well here maybe will not play as well there. There's kind of a double thing.

Jump cut to today and me being in China. Needless to say, the travel, the international experience, the working with foreign actors and foreign artists...it's thrilling to see how artists work the process. Just what I explained to you about the studio system over there. It was such an eye-opener.

But there's also the sense that what I have to offer works, but not always. What's going to be useful? What's not going to be useful? How to help that? Those kinds of things are really fun. What's funny to me may not necessarily be funny to my Chinese counterparts or Chinese audience. Communicating and collaborating, trying to figure out what is it about this that can be better, that they can laugh at and laugh with?

So the roots of the travel and the understanding of the cultural theatricality back in my youth are definitely paying off now. If you're a young director reading this article, this is key: travel, learn more, because it can pay off later. And theatre is an international art form. It has to be.

..... **MARC ROUTH** .....

**YUE LIU** | How long has Broadway Asia been developing this new work, *Jay Chou's The Secret*?

**MARC ROUTH** | I would say about two years. It's actually remarkably quick. We've been talking about a project using the Jay Chou songbook, and when we actually decided to do a musical based on this film, *The Secret*, it was only September of 2015. So, for the development of a musical, it's very, very, very quick.

I've been working in China and in Asia for over 20 years. We were always very excited by the power of Chinese pop music and how that might allow us to broaden the musical theatre audiences by tapping into that power. When we were looking for projects with our new partner, Global Broadway Entertainment, which is producing *Jay Chou's The Secret*, we brought this up. I've listened to a lot of Chinese pop music, and one of the big challenges is that a lot of the music is very similar and ballad heavy.

To be able to have a kind of variety that you need to sustain a musical, with up-tempo numbers and comedy numbers as well as romantic ballads, we needed a songbook or a series of songs that really had more variety than most pop singers. Jay Chou was ideal in

that way, and he was also ideal because he is so popular. Those two things together made it the right thing.

To be honest, we searched for a while to choose the proper material for the show, whether it should be an original musical. We didn't want to confuse Jay Chou's audience by choosing *Jay Chou's The Secret*, where they might think he would be in it, because that's not the idea. But eventually, what we found was that the marriage of the songs, because he wrote and directed and starred in that movie, the sensibility of the movie is very keyed to his style, so that the songs fit really perfectly. It was amazing, like a glove with a really easy fit.

**YUE** | Could you give us a little bit more information about the producing structure and your work with GBE, Global Broadway Entertainment?

**MARC** | Global Broadway Entertainment is a new entity. [The chairman is] Ivy Zhong. She is an established film producer, originally with Galloping Horse, which was the company she was a major executive with and [has] now branched out on her own. She was very excited about the possibility of getting a live entertainment division.



We're actually running two shows almost simultaneously. In addition to *Jay Chou's The Secret*, we're opening a huge immersive version of *Peter Pan*. GBE also produced a show on their own without us, the wedding show—*Where Is the Groom?* It's a bit like *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*.

[For *Jay Chou's The Secret*,] Broadway Asia is the executive producer, and Global Broadway Entertainment is the producer. Essentially, our job is to manage the creative process. We put together the creative team in conjunction with **John Rando**, of course. And I am managing the process; in addition to serving as executive producer, we're serving as the general manager for the production.

GBE is responsible for providing the financing, helping to deal with the venue issues, and generally providing on-ground supplementation of the requirements of the production. But because they're financing the production, they're ultimately responsible. It's like Broadway Asia is the captain of the ship, but GBE owns the ship.

**YUE** | You've been producing internationally for a really long time. With *Jay Chou's The Secret*, how did you decide which American artists you wanted to work with?

**MARC** | Having produced not only internationally, but also in New York and on Broadway, we have long-standing relationships with a lot of these artists. **John Rando** specifically is somebody who we have worked with multiple times through the years. I think he's an incredibly talented artist. He did the development for a Chinese production for us that actually was never ultimately produced, but we went through a workshop stage of a new musical based on *The Peony Pavilion*, which Maury Yeston wrote.

And then he worked on another international project for us, *Siddhartha*. We were the executive producers for [the] production. It's an Italian musical based on Siddhartha that **John Rando** directed for us in Italy, and then we mounted it at the Edinburgh Festival. It recently played [in] Mexico.

In any case, we've done that project with him, and John is also directing *Smokey Joe's Cafe* which we are producing on Broadway next year.

It's definitely challenging to work in this market in China. I think that [John] is on the same wavelength as us about the challenges and also the fact that we really enjoy cultural exchange. It is very fulfilling. When we succeed, we feel we've doubly or triply succeeded because it's a bit daunting.

**YUE** | Are there any Chinese artists on the creative team for *Jay Chou's The Secret*?

**MARC** | It's really an all-American team and a Broadway team, a group of artists [attracted to John]. It's the first time that a new Chinese musical has been created by a team like this.

**YUE** | But what about the culture gap? How do we solve those problems like culture or language barriers?

**MARC** | It is challenging. We rely on our Chinese partners to give us feedback for everything from whether the jokes are working to whether they're moved or how they feel. It is a little crazy. We were in rehearsal the other day, and I know that we were dealing with some of the crew moves. One of the [Chinese] crew guys who was using the script as his guide to do certain cues was saying, "Well, the actors weren't actually saying the words exactly as written on the page." John said, "Well, we're going to have to tell them they do have to say the words exactly on the page."

But it wasn't something he could know. If it was in English, of course, he would have been able to hear that, but [in this case,] he couldn't. So we have to keep double-checking. And translation is a really interesting process.

[We have to do the translation] back and forth [multiple times] to make the language sound conversational and make sense. It isn't just a translator translates and that's the end of it. We really have to have the cast feeding back to us what it means to them so that they understand it and so that it's in the right colloquial language.

**YUE** | How many translators were used? What kind of service did they provide?

**MARC** | There's a main translator for the script. John has a terrific bilingual assistant, who is also a director in his own right. And every department has a translator, or they have a key staff member, who is bilingual.

**YUE** | Are they professional translators in China, or are they theatre people?

**MARC** | I don't think we have the kind of professional translators who translate for the UN. Sometimes that would be great. [Translators] are expensive, and I don't know that they're necessarily right for us because, a lot of the time, the language is very technical. If we can find a bilingual person, who works in the theatre, that's going to be much better for us than even a professional translator in some cases.

Definitely, a phrase lost in translation certainly occurs to us on an hourly basis. It is very [challenging] because we're not only dealing with language translation, [but also] cultural

translation. I'm sure you're aware that a lot of translators edit—they don't translate exactly because they're making allowances for cultural differences. So, a very blunt comment by an American doesn't get translated, or a very blunt comment by a Chinese person doesn't get translated. They tend to make nice. Sometimes that's a bad thing because the intensity or the passion or the sincere need isn't really expressed.

**YUE** | So Jay Chou's manager, Global Broadway Entertainment, Broadway Asia, and also the bookwriter all got involved in this process?

**MARC** | Yeah, I would say that. When we were trying to convince Jay's manager to go forward with this project, I wrote a treatment where I integrated the songs into the story of *Jay Chou's The Secret*. When we hired Marc Acito, the book writer, that was one of the things I gave to him, but I said, "You don't have to use this at all. This is just what we pitched, so go crazy."

He listened to all the music and came up with his ideas about what worked better. Then John read it and responded to it. We made further adjustment[s]. The show has evolved, as musicals do. We went through a reading and then a workshop and now our production. With each step along the way, we've refined the musical choices.

**YUE** | How many readings and workshops did you have?

**MARC** | We had a reading and then a workshop. Now we have the production rehearsal process, and songs change during each of those phases, including a new song that was added for the production phase that was not in either the workshop or the reading. And so we've just been refining those choices and making the story work.

The beauty in this case is that we have all these songs prewritten that we can turn to. At one point, we thought we might have Jay to write a new song specifically for the musical, but it turned out we didn't need that, and we were able to find what we needed in his catalog.

**YUE** | Where did the reading and workshop take place?

**MARC** | We did both in Shanghai; now we're rehearsing in Taicang, a suburb of Shanghai. It's about an hour from Shanghai proper, and it's got its own rehearsal space and grand theatre, which is perfect for us. We're both rehearsing and then teching the show in that one venue, and there's a hotel right in walking distance, very convenient.

**YUE** | Who was invited to the reading and workshop?



PHOTO: C/O Broadway Asia

**MARC** | We did the reading with the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. They helped us put it together, and we used some of their performers. [We invited some] internal friends and some of their staff [to] the first reading. We did the workshop in Daning, which is one of the districts in Shanghai. They also have rehearsal space in their theatre.

And the people at that presentation were some Daning Theatre staff as well as our internal people. There were also some of Jay Chou's [promoters], who will be involved in presenting some of the tour dates for the shows. And our team, our U.S. creative people.

**YUE** | Did the government review the production?

**MARC** | I don't think specifically. They do have to read the script to give us the permit to actually perform it. I haven't heard any issues with that so far. I assume that is happening smoothly.

**YUE** | Did you receive any financial support from the government?

**MARC** | No. It's actually all privately financed in this particular case.

**YUE** | The reading, workshop, and rehearsal all took place in Shanghai. Why are you going to open the show in Beijing?

**MARC** | Honestly, we would have opened in Shanghai if there was a venue available at the time, but we actually had a window of time that probably was driven mostly by **John Rando**'s schedule. This was the slot he could give us, so we had to open in this window. And when we put it all together and looked for a theatre that was available at this time, we were able to squeak by and get this Beijing venue, because we finish our technical rehearsals and

our previews in Taicang, and then we have just enough time to get the show in and get it up now in Beijing.

**YUE** | Tianqiao Theater, right?

**MARC** | Yeah, Tianqiao. Exactly.

**YUE** | Yes, it is a good theatre.

**MARC** | Oh, it's beautiful. We actually opened another show there this summer, called *China Goes Pop*, which is a show we did with the government, which basically takes pop music and pop culture and wraps it around traditional Chinese art forms, like acrobatics and face changing and shadow puppetry and stuff like that.

**YUE** | Interesting. Is that a musical?

**MARC** | No. It's more like a nonverbal performance piece. It's in the vein of *Stomp* or *Cookin'* or *Tap Dogs*. It does tell a story but doesn't use words to tell it. It's a love story all done through the acts, the acrobatic acts, the shadow puppetry, the face changing, and all that kind of stuff.

**YUE** | After you open in Beijing, is the show going to tour around China?

**MARC** | Yeah, it opens in Beijing, and then there's a few weeks' break before it opens in February in Shanghai. We haven't announced the rest of the tour dates, but we expect it to tour for years in China. Also, his fan base extends to other Asian countries; we expect to play in Korea and Japan and Singapore and other Asian territories.

To be honest, we're really happy with the show, and we think that it might actually have a life translated into English in the Western market. We'll see. I can't say that for sure yet, but we think that's possible.

**YUE** | That would be wonderful because there are many international students from China and Asian immigrants that knew Jay Chou and are big fans of his music.

**MARC** | Yes. It's good. It's good music. We've all become fans in the process.

There are so many people who have grown up with him—he's the soundtrack of their lives. Our cast is in their twenties, and they've all grown up with his music. When he came to rehearsal, they were just wild-eyed. It was amazing.

Every time I see [the show], I cry. I walked into the rehearsal yesterday, and they were running the end. I literally had been there 90 seconds, and I started crying. The music just fits so perfectly with the story that we're telling. It's a little bit different than the original story, but I don't think I'll spoil it if I say that everyone's reunited in the end, and it's a happy ending. It's very moving [and] emotionally satisfying.

**YUE** | Yes. I'm really intrigued. I think I have to go back to China and see it.

SDC