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BENJ PASEK & JUSTIN PAUL

Brawo!

The musical geniuses behind *Dear Evan Hansen*
could teach us all about handling success
(They're really nice) PG 66

From *La La Land*

to *Dear Evan Hansen*

Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

are music men superstars

LIFE'S A SONG

BY JILL JOHNSON

BACK WHEN HE WAS A KID AT LONG LOTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, Justin Paul loved the mallet percussion set in the back of the music room. The xylophones and marimbas mesmerized him. He remembers playing and improvising during music class, a regular part of the curriculum in Westport. Imagine if he grew up in one of the many districts where music has stopped playing, where math, informational text and standardized test prep fill the day with the dull sound of No. 2 pencils on paper. It's unlikely this Westport native would have taken the stage to receive an Oscar and a Tony this year, with a Grammy and an Emmy as possibilities within the next.

DIRTY SUGAR PHOTOGRAPHY





With Cynthia Erivo and John Legend, who performed a *La La Land* medley at the Academy Awards • With Ben Platt, star of *Dear Evan Hansen* • Accepting the Tony for *DEH* with producer Stacey Mindich, director Michael Greif and playwright Steven Levenson

Even in an artsy town like Westport, you may not be familiar with the acronym EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony), but it must be on the minds of Justin Paul and his songwriting partner Benj Pasek. Or maybe the thirty-two-year-old creative geniuses behind 2017’s Best Musical, *Dear Evan Hansen*, are so busy working that they don’t have time to think much about awards. Yet, Pasek and Paul, as they are known professionally, are poised to hit the grand slam ten times faster than the speediest EGOT winner yet.

When the duo won an Oscar for Best Original Song as lyricists for “City of Stars” in *La La Land*, Justin gave a shout-out to the Westport school system: “I was educated in public schools where arts and culture are valued and recognized and resourced. And I’m so grateful for all my teachers, who taught so much and gave so much to us.”

Justin and Benj—who have been featured in the *New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*—graciously took time out of their hectic schedules to sit down in the “blue room” backstage at the Music Box Theatre to talk about arts education with Justin’s hometown mag.

HOMEGROWN TALENT

“As a kid, I would see all the Staples shows, and my mom would take me to the Arts Nights that Alice Lipson used to organize,” says Justin. “It was everything from violin solos to a cappella groups to people performing songs from shows. That’s where I was like, ‘That’s what I want to be; that’s who I want to be.’ My heroes were Staples Players, like Ryan O’Neil [who now goes by Ryan Smith], Charles Carlton, Josh Gang. Those were the people I wanted to be like when I got to Staples.”

Justin began private piano lessons at seven years old and took up the drums. He did shows with Pocket Players and walked in the door at MTC (Music Theatre of Connecticut) at age nine and landed the lead role in *Oliver!* Many starring roles followed.

About his first show with Players, *Mame*, he says, “It was everything I imagined it would be. I felt like I was able to be part of this special tradition. Players is the best of all worlds in terms of a club that is run by students but still has a faculty presence, and the quality of the work is so high. For students interested in the arts, it’s really such an amazing catch-all home.” At Staples, Justin took full advantage of the music and theater programs: “I played in the band, orchestra, jazz band, sang with Orphenians.” Justin also conducted his final senior concert and the pit orchestra for *Hello, Dolly!*

“My philosophy on why Players is so successful,” he explains, “is not just because there’s great leadership and support from the town, but



FROM TOP: LEFT, DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS FOR TONY AWARDS; DEH BY CINDY ORD FOR GETTY IMAGES; DEH, TONY © SHEVETT STUDIOS

“BEING ABLE TO MAKE SONGS, MAKE ART, WAS ALWAYS SOMETHING I WANTED TO DO. I DIDN’T KNOW HOW OR WHEN THAT WOULD HAPPEN.” —BENJ PASEK



The set of *Dear Evan Hansen*, music and lyrics by Pasek and Paul. The show was nominated for nine Tony Awards and won six, including Best Musical and Best Original Score.

also because it empowers students. They do the hair and makeup, the scenic work, props, lighting design, conduct the orchestra—these are all things teens really aren’t equipped to do yet, but learn by doing it.”

Rhonda Paul, Justin’s mom, volunteered as production manager for the Players for eight years, even beyond Justin and his brother Tyler’s time as Players. “During the show, it’s all under supervision of the students,” she says. “It’s amazing!” Justin’s exceptional talent was highlighted when Orchestra Director Adele Valovich turned over her baton to him—though the signs were there from the start.

OPENING SCENE

“When Justin was imitating sounds as a baby, my mom said, ‘He does that on key. He’s doing that on the same note I am!’” recalls Rhonda. “As a toddler, he could not stay still, especially when there was music playing. He’d be dancing, stomping, keeping rhythm.” With self-taught musicians on both sides of the family, Justin began teaching himself piano at a young age. “I put him in lessons before he got too far along and wouldn’t want to go back and do the hard work of learning to read music.”

Playing in orchestra came easily. “Adele told me, ‘He’s so gifted musically. But you know, it really infuriates me because he will sit there doing homework or reading a book while other kids are counting every measure, and he knows exactly when to come in. He never misses a cue!’” recounts Rhonda.

While Justin was also athletic—he managed to play baseball his freshman year—his arts endeavors drove his schedule throughout

the rest of high school. Being in that clique had its challenges, but when Justin and Benj—who met at freshman orientation at the University of Michigan—won their Oscar, they accepted it for “musical theater nerds everywhere!”

“I was lucky to live in a town where theater wasn’t a totally nerdy thing to do, but I think being a theater geek now is a lot cooler than it was then,” Justin says. “We used to perform each show for the whole school. I was in *Guys and Dolls* as a fruit-wearing, literally, Havana dancer. I remember thinking, Oh, wow, everyone is gonna make fun of me for this, and to an extent they did. But there was also a kid in my grade who was the epitome of the cool football jock. I didn’t realize there had been a video showing on the townwide channel of my a cappella group, The Testostertones. I barely knew him, and he came up to me and was like, ‘Yo, I saw you in that concert on TV.’ I was thinking, Oh my God, this is so not good. And he’s like, ‘Yo, that’s amazing. I don’t know how you do that.’”

Justin adds, “A really big difference from when we grew up is the Internet.” While *Dear Evan Hansen* explores the hazards of social media, there’s also good to be found. “There’s a way to connect with people in whatever your niche is. People connect online about the show. Look at this fan art. They may feel like they are nerds for loving

PHOTOGRAPH © MATTHEW MURPHY

“MY PARENTS TALKED ABOUT MUSIC SCHOOL, BUT I WASN’T SURE I HAD THE CONFIDENCE TO PURSUE MUSIC IN REAL LIFE.” —JUSTIN PAUL

the show as much as they do, in their school, but then they connect online with all these people who feel the same way about it. There’s such confidence that comes from that.”

Benj, who is from Ardmore, outside Philadelphia, also was immersed in theater growing up. “In towns like Westport—and I grew up in a somewhat similar community—being smart is valued and being engaged with the arts is valued,” he says. “That trickles down and makes kids feel safe to pursue passions that aren’t necessarily valued in other places in the country. It starts with the community and with how parents respond. In my opinion, Westport is definitely a place that boasts really great values and invests in those values for the next generation.”

Benj went to a Quaker school. Though smaller than Staples, he says the two schools have something in common: “We had teachers who challenged us and didn’t talk down to us. That’s something I’m really impressed with, in getting to know some of the Westport teachers like David Roth and Ben Frimmer. They give material to these kids that a lot of people would consider too complex or controversial. My drama teacher was also forward-thinking and adventurous. We did *Angels in America* and Anna Deavere Smith plays.”

Justin adds that *Merrily We Roll Along* was his favorite Players show, because it was “such a bold choice. It’s a complicated, very adult show. I also got to play the piano in my role, so it was the best of all possible worlds.” In fact, his character was a Broadway musical composer. If that didn’t provide enough foreshadowing of Justin’s career, they also did a press shoot in which Justin and his cast mate posed outside the Music Box Theatre!

During junior year, Justin visited Duke, Emory and other schools in the South. “My parents talked about music school,” he says, “but I wasn’t sure I had the confidence to pursue music in real life.”

His mom adds, “He’s so practical and wanted to be a family man since he was a little guy. I think he was worried about attaining the stability he would need to provide for a family.”

The lightbulb moment came at the end of his junior year. “Someone I didn’t know came up to me after a show

and said, ‘Great job! You were really wonderful in the show. You’re going to pursue this, right?’ I said, ‘I don’t know.’ He said, ‘Oh, you really should. This is what you should study in college.’ Someone who didn’t know me saying that really had an impact. I wish I knew who that person was!”

This revelation about his future was not the only one. “We were in rehearsals for *Into the Woods*,” he recalls. “We weren’t learning the music. We were just sitting talking about it, which I thought was very lame. We were going through the lyrics to ‘No One Is Alone.’ Mr. Roth asked, ‘Why does the baker say *fathers*? Why would the writer choose for him to say *fathers*?’ The point was to understand the subtext. There is a puppeteer orchestrating all of this. Every single moment is intentional. It sounds very basic, but, at the time, I was like, Oh, that’s what a writer does! That planted the seed for me in terms of writing.”

Things took root when he met Benj. “Being able to make songs, make art, was always something that I wanted to do,” Benj says. “I didn’t know how or when that would happen, but then meeting Justin obviously changed my life.”

TEAMING UP

Justin and Benj landed at University of Michigan, which boasts a top musical theater program. “We bonded over being terrible ballet dancers,” says Justin.

Benj adds, “We started writing songs as an escape from the demoralizing nature of ballet class.”

When they didn’t get good roles in the school show, the duo wrote a musical review, *Edges*, and took it on the road via minivan. “We really just went any place where our moms’ friends would buy tickets and CDs,” says Benj. “Westport really turned out for us!”

David Roth, director of Staples Players, shares a pivotal meeting involving that CD. “I get this phone call from Carol de Giere, who was writing a biography on Stephen Schwartz,” he explains. “She was writing the chapter on *Children of Eden*, which we were doing. She came to see it three or four times and was impressed. She then invited Kerry and me to come talk to Stephen Schwartz. She asked if we wanted to bring anyone. We invited Justin, who was a junior at Michigan, and our music director, Don Rickenback... . It was just us, sitting together in a living room for four hours discussing the show. Stephen sat at the piano and played different versions of the songs. Rhonda told Justin he had to give Stephen the CD, but he was embarrassed. I told him, ‘You need to do this!’ At end of the evening, he shyly gave it to him. A couple months later, he gets pages and pages of notes from Stephen on the music! He became somewhat instrumental in their rising star.”

Pasek and Paul graduated in 2006. “We’re very grateful for having gone to Michigan,” says Justin. “We gained as much from our liberal arts classes as from our music training.” While they agree that college

(Clockwise from left) An early talent • with Trey Skinner in *Merrily We Roll Along* • with Skinner at the Music Box Theatre (now *Dear Evan Hansen*’s home) • Stephen Schwartz, Justin Paul, Don Rickenback, Kerry Long, David Roth and author Carol de Giere • Sarah Peterson, Justin Paul and Emma Ritter in *Into the Woods* • early signs of talent



is the right path for those interested in a musical theater or music career, they admit there are exceptions to the rule: Ben Platt, the incredibly gifted star of *Dear Evan Hansen*, who landed *Pitch Perfect* and dropped out of Columbia after six weeks, is a prime example.

In 2010 Pasek and Paul joined the creative team for *A Christmas Story, The Musical*; in 2013 they received a Tony nomination for Best Original Score. Former Player Peter Duchan, for whom Justin composed music to a song in high school, brought *Dogfight* to them. It became an award-winning off-Broadway show. Film and TV work poured in as well.

This year, *Dear Evan Hansen*—which was inspired by an incident that happened in Pasek’s high school—garnered six Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Score. “It’s such incredibly brave storytelling,” says Roth. “It really taps into so many contemporary issues and feelings of current high school students, yet, at the same time, it’s a totally unique story. I love the music.”

Roth adds, “Justin and Benj are so incredibly gracious. I really try to emphasize to our students that you can be talented and hardworking, but being a good person matters too; Justin and Benj both truly are.”

Fame, for them, is more about making other people happy. “Nothing makes us more excited than getting to see our families’ reaction to all of it,” says Benj. “When you are on the red carpet, you are just trying to make sure you don’t have toothpaste on your cheek.”

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