

# The Quiet Composer

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David Krane. “Who?” you may ask. Well, within the world of stage and screen there would be no “Who?” when his name is mentioned. David Krane is a solid professional: a pianist, composer and arranger of dance and incidental music for 29 Broadway productions and two films, including the Oscar-winning movie, “Chicago.” He has also written—with lyricist Stephen Cole—the musical “Aspire” for Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar.

“Within the business, I am very well known—at one time, I had four shows on Broadway simultaneously—but the public has never heard of me,” he said this week as he sat in the light and airy confines of his Roxbury home, which he shares with his partner, graphic designer and realtor Rick Brainard.

Mr. Krane explained that a composer of dance and incidental music writes all the music for dance sequences and background in musicals. “You work with the choreographer, maybe start with a tune from the show and then create the whole cloth,” he said. “But when people are sitting there, they never know [that more than one composer has been at work].”

While his career has stretched over three decades and has brought him industry recognition, “The one thing that has eluded me is recognition as a composer in my own right,” he said.

Mr. Krane hopes that this relative anonymity will change this fall with the world premiere of the musical comedy, “The Road to Qatar,” which chronicles the making of “Aspire.” It will open in Dallas, Tex., in October before moving to New York.

“At this point in my life, I feel as if all the [different parts] of my career are converging,” he said.

Mr. Krane may be only 56 but his career began to emerge even before he left high school. Indeed, his precocious capacity as a composer began to manifest itself before he left the nursery. “My mother bought me a little toy piano, like the one in ‘Peanuts,’” he remembered. “My mother was not a professional, but she was very musical. I was making up little tunes on the piano and her friends saw that I was talented. They said my parents should send me to Juilliard.”

Juilliard was not in his future, but the Mannes College of Music’s preparatory division was. In what he called the New York City school’s equivalent of “a musical romper room,” he started piano studies at age 6. “From age 6 to 16, I went every Saturday to take music lessons,” he said.

That experience was amplified when he attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City, beginning his composing career at 14 when he set part of the Roman Catholic Mass to music. It was performed in Carnegie Hall for his high school graduation. “I skipped two grades,” he reported, “so I graduated at 16. I played the piano and it was performed by 100 voices. My old piano teacher came, and she was so, so proud of me.”

His education continued at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. While he was still a new student there, Neva Small, goddaughter of Leonard Bernstein, introduced him to the famous composer at the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. “She said, ‘This boy needs help,’ and he told me to send him some of my music.”

He became a Bernstein protégé, a connection that later helped him gain his first position in a Broadway musical orchestra for the show “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.” With his foot wedged in the entertainment world’s door, young David Krane never looked back. For his next show he was music director.

At 26, he wrote and arranged music for his first Broadway show, “Carmelina.” “It was not a success,” he said, “but it put my name on the front cover of the program.”

And in 1977, he worked with Meryl Streep on the musical “Happy End,” a happy association that led to an invitation to play at her wedding, which, unhappily, he was unable to do because of prior commitments. He did not run into the actress again until 2003 when she presented Peter O’Toole with his lifetime achievement award at the Academy Awards. Mr. Krane was music director for the event.

“I asked her if she recognized me—when I knew her before I was young and had hair,” he said. “She said she had seen my name in the credits ‘and wondered if it was my David’—wasn’t that nice? It was as if no time had passed.”

The years have brought Mr. Krane much suc-



Above, David Krane at home in Roxbury. Bottom left, the composer with Sophia Loren, Bottom center, Mr. Krane, seated behind a woman in black at a Dohar, Qatar performance of “Aspire,” a musical for which he composed the music. It was the first American musical to be performed in the Middle East. Bottom right, Mr. Krane and lyricist Stephen Cole on a camel ride; photographs courtesy of Mr. Krane.

cess. For Broadway, he composed the dance and incidental music for the “La Cage Aux Folles” revival, the Tony Award-winning revival of “Cabaret,” “Man of La Mancha,” and the new “Oklahoma,” starring Hugh Jackman and for which he composed a new dream ballet for Susan Stroman. “I was the first person allowed to write new music for it,” he said. “I was very honored.”

Other shows included “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” “The Music Man,” “Showboat,” “Victor/Victoria” with Julie Andrews and “Ragtime,” among many others.

He also worked in television, writing music for “Once Upon a Mattress,” the 2005 production starring Carol Burnett and Tracey Ullman; the award-winning “Annie,” for which he received a special citation from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Primetime Emmy Awards; “Mrs. Santa Claus,” with Angela Lansbury; “Cinderella,” starring Whitney Houston, and “The Kennedy Center Honors.”

As mentioned previously, Mr. Krane created the dance music and additional score adaptation for the movie, “Chicago,” for which he won a Gold Record, and he has recently completed work on Rob Marshall’s film version of “Nine.” The movie is based on Fellini’s “8½” and has an all-star cast including Daniel Day-Lewis, Penelope Cruz, Nicole Kidman, Kate Hudson, Dame Judi Dench, Sophia Loren, Stacy Ferguson and Marion Cotillard, who portrayed Edith Piaf in “La Vie en Rose.” The movie, now in post-production is to open Thanksgiving weekend.

“This time I arranged the entire movie,” reported the enthusiastic composer. “We worked on the choreography for months.”

Mr. Krane’s talent has kept him firmly fixed in the theatrical world he learned to love when his parents took him to Broadway shows while he was still a child. But perhaps his wildest experience came in 2005 when he received an e-mail out of

the blue that read, “We want you write musical. How much?”

Lyricist Stephen Cole, whom he had never met, received an identical e-mail. It set the two men on a path that would result in the first American musical ever performed in the Middle East. “Aspire” premiered in Dohar, Qatar, in November 2005.

“Qatar is about the size of Connecticut,” Mr. Krane explained. “They were building the world’s largest glass-enclosed soccer arena, Aspire Sports Academy. They decided to cap the three-day opening ceremony with an American show.”

Mr. Cole and Mr. Krane immediately hit it off and the collaboration was underway. “That’s how I found myself on a plane to Dubai,” he recalled. “When we got there, we met this Middle Eastern action movie star who had sold the idea to the Emir. Everyone was being paid by the Emir and they dictated the plot—they wanted something like a Middle Eastern ‘Wizard of Oz’ where a sultan’s spoiled son is taken on an adventure on a flying carpet. It had to be done in six weeks and we finished it in five.”

The collaborators soon went on an odyssey of their own. They travelled to Dohar, where the sports stadium was being constructed. There they were picked up by an SUV with a “valley girl” interpreter.

“We drove out into the desert and the driver stopped and let air out of the tires,” Mr. Krane recounted. “We didn’t know what they were doing. Then they took us on a wild ride through the desert at what had to be 100 miles per hour. They think that is fun. The interpreter kept telling me to relax. We arrived in an encampment where there was a belly dancer, and then we went on camel rides. We felt like we were in ‘The Road to Morocco.’”

They lived through their night of entertainment, but the worst was not over. The pair returned to the United States to write the production, Mr.

Krane armed with a tape of Qatari folk tunes. In July, they were off to London to perform the music for their producers. The 90-minute presentation was met with stony faces, but the creators soon learned that the response was prompted by cultural errors. One lyric, for instance, contained the phrase, “à la mode” and they were told the name of Allah could not be included in any song. One folk tune, it turned out, could only be played during Ramadan.

Still, the music got the green light, and Mr. Krane was quickly off to Bratslava to oversee pre-recording of the music by a 70-piece orchestra. He also tried to pre-record the music using Bratslavian singers, but their phonetic English sounded too wooden, so it was back to England where the music was recorded with English-speaking singers. A British cast was eventually selected.

With the show written, music pre-recorded and an Italian opera director chosen to cast and pull it all together, Mr. Krane and Mr. Cole were astounded to learn that they would not be present at rehearsals. “The Italian opera director had never done musical theater before,” said Mr. Krane, “but he designed all the sets and costumes.”

The stage was huge and so far from even the best seats that opera glasses were placed on all the seats. And, because it was written in English for a largely Arab audience, the entire dialogue was translated in the program, “which weighed five pounds,” according to Mr. Krane.

He and Mr. Cole were finally summoned to Qatar two days before the opening so they could watch the final rehearsals. What they stepped into was chaos. The show never progressed past the third number in the final rehearsals. “Aspire,” with its 175-member cast, opened without a full run-through or even a technical rehearsal. Miraculously, the show came off.

The creators, who feared the worst, were told to be ready for curtain calls. When they bowed, the Emir stood up and cheered. “It was kind of a magical moment,” Mr. Krane recalled. “I had to go 11,000 miles to hear my music on a big stage.”

The magic was only slightly dimmed by the fact that Mr. Krane and Mr. Cole never received their last payments.

“You can’t make this kind of stuff up,” said Mr. Krane. “We would tell people about it, and they would say, ‘That sounds like a show.’” So that is what the collaborators did: they wrote “The Road to Qatar.” “We’ve been working on it for three years, refining it,” he said. “It is so funny and it moves very quickly. We treat the Arabs with affection—you can’t make fun of them. I feel we have done a small bit for peace in the world.”

Even with that production in the offing, Mr. Krane’s attention turned last month to a shorter project. In May he and Mr. Cole participated in Ripfest 10, a collaborative filmmaking project that brings together filmmakers to create five-minute films in just 16 days. Teams composed of a producer, writer, composer, director, editor, cameraman, choreographer and two to four actors were given guidelines, were provided with two locations and were sent out to work their magic. They had two days to write the first draft, two days for rewrites, two days for pre-production, two days to shoot and one week for post-production, scoring and graphics. All films are screened May 26.

“Everyone is working for free, so there is no commercial intrusion,” Mr. Krane said. His team was given locations in the meat-packing district in New York City and at a Greenwich Village pottery school. “I was teamed with a most talented director who had never done a musical and who was not very keen about musicals,” he reported. The two had to figure out what to do and fast.

They decided on a film about a dejected man who has just lost his job and who stumbles and falls into a pottery workshop. Hearing music, he follows the sound and through a series of inspirations discovers that the true joy of life is to be creative; that like clay, he can mold his future.

David Krane is molding his future, as he looks forward to the production of “Qatar” in October and the release of “Nine” in November. Confident in the trajectory of his career and his established connections to other creative people, he anticipates many future creative endeavors even as he enjoys his growing knowledge of Litchfield County, where he has owned a home for seven years. “Rick is a native of Connecticut and he wanted a home here,” said Mr. Krane. “I am a real New York boy, but I was looking online one day and this place just popped up. I told Rick about this place, and he drove by on his lunch hour. We saw it and bought it. We just love it here.”

