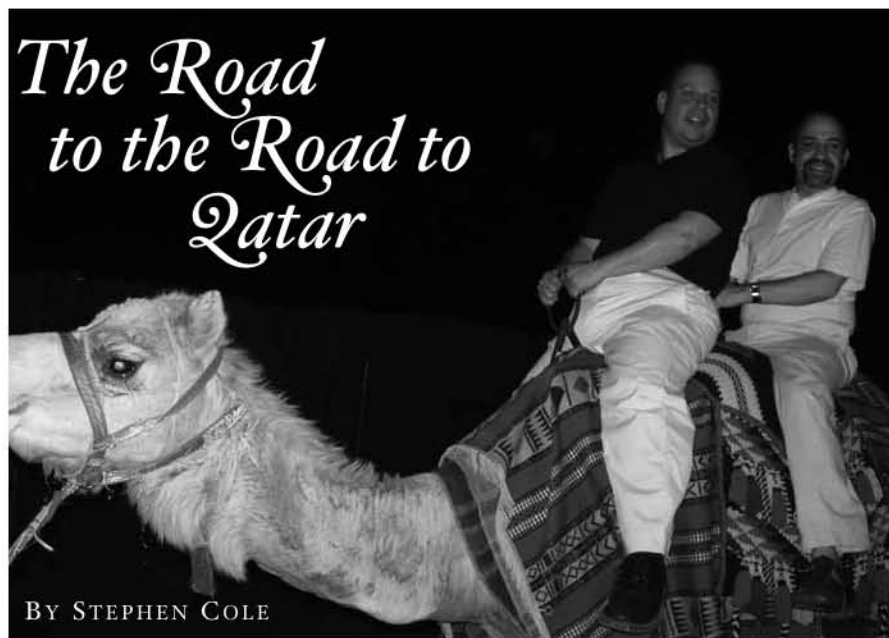


The Road to the Road to Qatar

BY STEPHEN COLE



It all began with an email. "We want you write musical...how much?" Was my Spam blocker set on low or was some friend playing a joke? Reading on, the email brusquely ordered me to call a number in Dubai. Dubai? The Middle East? Now, *that's* long distance. And isn't there a war there? I emailed them back and told them to call *me*. Two minutes later the phone rang and a heavily accented voice spoke, "We want you write musical...how much?" After explaining that my agent handles the money, I asked for some information about what they wanted. The voice told me to write any questions I had in an email and they would be answered.

Question: How did you find me? Answer: Your website. Wow, I thought, Stephen Sondheim must not have a good website. Many emails later, I found out that the musical was to be presented for one night in Qatar (a small democracy about an hour's plane ride from Dubai, which is part of the United Arab Emirates) for the Emir and one thousand foreign dignitaries. There would be no tickets sold. So, how much?

After some Internet research I found out that Dubai and Qatar were very, very wealthy, so I instructed my wary agent ("You'll never see the money") to ask for the moon. Opportunities like this seldom knock for humble musical theatre writers, so the moon seemed a good place to start. After some negotiations a nice round number was agreed upon. It wasn't the moon, but it wasn't bad. There were to be three payments: one upon signing, one upon completion of the show...we would have a whole Six weeks to write it...and the final payment five days before the opening. Easy money, right? After all, the show would probably be translated into Arabic (it was not) and I wouldn't even have to rhyme my lyrics (I

did). There was the question of who would write the music of course (I am a librettist/lyricist). "Don't worry," I was told, "we have many composers in Rome and Turkey." Rome and Turkey? How about using one of the composers I work with here in the U.S.? No reply. I guess their websites weren't good enough. Finally I got an email informing me that my new collaborator would be David Krane. David Krane! Thank the Lord! We had never met, but I knew that he was an experienced musician who has written and arranged dance music (sometimes orchestrating and musical directing as well) for dozens of Broadway and TV musicals (not to mention the film version of *Chicago*). And he lived in New York!

So we met. Talk about separated at birth. It was like looking into a short Jewish mirror. Two short Jews who wrote musicals. And it took some strangers in the Middle East to put us together. We bonded instantly, which was good, because we were soon to share two on the aisle on a twelve-hour flight to Dubai where we were to meet our employers.

Dubai was like Las Vegas on steroids. Huge hotels shaped like sailboats rose from the 120-degree sands. There were cranes everywhere constructing even more spec-

tacularly ostentatious monuments to oil. I joked to David that we should have asked for more money. Little did I know I was right!

When we arrived at the offices of the production company we met our Egyptian producer, Mr. Ahmed (we quickly found out that it was polite to put Mr. before one's first name), his newly hired translator (a 20-year-old Lebanese valley girl who never ate but constantly complained about her weight), and, dressed in traditional Arab attire from head to toe, Mr. Nasser, the artistic director who came up with the idea of the show in the first place.

So, down to business. What was the show about? The slim plot hinged on a spoiled-rotten Sultan's son who's locked in a palace and wants to possess a star in the sky. That was it. Okay. Putting on my librettist's hat, I started asking basic questions.

"Why was the Sultan's son locked in the palace?"

There was much heated conversation in many different Arabic dialects. Finally, the translator translated.

"Okay...the Sultan's son very spoiled and locked in the palace."

"I get that. But WHY is he locked in the palace?"

Once again foreign tongues wagged for



several minutes.

"Okay...he say, the Sultan's son VERY spoiled and LOCKED in the palace."

This was going to be hard.

"But why? Did he do something bad? Did he look at the dirty sights on the Internet? Why?"

Very patiently the translator translated my question to Mr. Nasser. Mr. Nasser, who looked like a terrorist at the best of times (he was actually a Qatari movie star who specialized in playing ferocious looking terrorists), looked like his Uzi was about to emerge. He growled emphatically to the translator.

"Oookay. He say the Sultan's son very SPOILED and MUST be locked in palace. That is all!"

That settled, we went on. What else should be in the show?

This time, the answers were quick in coming:

It must be about the desert. It must be about the sea. It must be about pharaonic Egypt. (What's pharaonic?) It must be about ancient Greece. It must be about the Stone Age. David and I pictured a musical about the Flintstones and giggled. It must be about pearl diving and falconry. Birds? Not just birds. We were informed that we would also have twenty camels and ten Arabian stallions in the show. Finally David

asked Mr. Ahmed how much the budget for this show was.

"Less than you think!" he quickly answered in perfect English.

My head was reeling. How could I fashion a ninety-minute musical ("It must be ninety minutes!") with all these ingredients? But they were not finished.

"It must be about Muhammad Ali!"

Of course! The show was being performed in a sports arena, the soon-to-be largest domed soccer stadium in the world; they wanted a sports star to be part of the festivities.

Okay, now that we had the list of "must be's," it was time for lunch and then we could come back and write the outline for the show before dinner. Panic set in, but luckily lunch took several hours and it was soon time for dinner. But not before we were taken in expensive recreational vehicles deep into the desert night and driven up and down ten story sand dunes at 120 miles per hour.

Was this our punishment for not handing in the outline on time?

The next day we were flown to Qatar (one hour away and one hour earlier time wise...Middle Easterners love to say that time doesn't rule them, they rule time. In this case they're right) to see the almost finished soccer stadium. It was...enormous!

The show would have to be as gargantuan as *Jumbo* to fill the space. The enormity of the space gave me ideas.

If no one would tell me why the Sultan's son was locked in the palace I would just have to tell *them*. This was my job: to make all the pieces fit and write a coherent musical in English (now I would have to rhyme well!) that no one in the audience would understand!

I proceeded to answer my own questions and convey the answers to Mr. Ahmed and Mr. Nasser (we already had a new translator; it was another day, after all). Where was the Sultan's mother? She was never spoken of, so I decided she died when the boy was very small and that the Sultan locked his son in the palace to protect him from the outside world, lavishing great gifts on him, spoiling him rotten. And the star the boy craved? She would be a character in the show: a magical sassy Bette Midler-like figure who could fly down from the sky and take him on magical journeys to...ancient Greece, pharaonic Egypt and Qatar when pearl diving was all the rage. Wanting no part of Fred and Barney, I dumped the Stone Age. And since we were presenting all this in a sports arena, each journey would endow the boy with one of the three elements that make a good sportsman: brain, heart and strength. Hoping our employers hadn't actually seen *The Wizard of Oz*, we held our breath. After a moment, Mr. Nasser raised his arms in a benediction and proclaimed, "Do whatever you want!"

We were thrilled. Then we remembered we now had six weeks to write an entire original musical! Back in New York, avoiding emails from Dubai, we magically turned out a song a day. Every morning I would drop off a lyric and ride my bike home and walk through my door to the phone ringing.

"I've got the tune," David would say. "You're going to love it."

And nine times out of ten I did! We wrote as if we were writing Broadway's next Tony Award-winning musical. Forget not

rhyming. I did some of my best lyrics and the music was filled with the mystery and beauty of Arabian nights, with a little Broadway and pop thrown in for good measure. We were cooking. Although we never quite knew what the next scene would be, knowing that the second large payment was waiting for us, we finished the musical in a record five weeks. It had everything: camels, soaring stars, singing Sultans, dancing sport celebrities, flying carpets, King Tut, and a small chunk of Homer's *Odyssey*.

The script was emailed, the second payment wired to us, and we were summoned to London to sing the score. Arriving two days after the infamous terrorist tube and bus bombing, we played and sang the music in the window of a piano store in the Arab part of town. Our 90-minute presentation was met with dead silence ("Tough crowd," whispered Larry Blank, our American orchestrator). We reminded ourselves that the check clearing in the bank was our applause. After some notes on the script ("You cannot use Allah in the script." "Allah? No, it's a la mode...ice cream on top."), David was sent to Bratislava to record the orchestral score with a 70-piece symphony (why Bratislava? It's cheap!) and returned home to await our next command. We waited...and waited, finally realizing that we were not to be included in the casting (British actors were selected to play the roles, supplemented by Croatian acrobats, Russian dancers and various Middle Eastern supernumeraries) or the rehearsals (an Italian opera director who had never seen a musical was hired to direct, design the sets and costumes, and call the show from his cell phone).

Finally we were flown to Qatar for the last rehearsals and the gala performance in front of the Emir.

When we arrived we found the show in a shambles. The cast was tanned but under-rehearsed. No run-through ever got past the third song. The lights were rented from a local disco, the Russian dancers were choreographed by a kindergarten dance

teacher from Boca Raton, the sets were so huge that some of them didn't fit on the stage, the effects (including a wall-to-wall LED screen rivaling Times Square) didn't work, there were flying accidents, backstage fights among the hundreds of Arabs required to push the huge sets around and no one spoke the same language. As the opening approached, David and I were not optimistic.

And we still hadn't received our final payment.

One hour after curtain time, after the Emir arrived ("show no start without Emir!"), everyone settled in for the show. The lights went down and we prayed for a miracle. And a miracle occurred. The show began and it never stopped. It lurched, it lumbered, it limped, but it went on. Pre-recording the music meant that there was a built-in motor. Once a musical sequence started it couldn't stop.

Having never seen much of the show, we were riveted in our seats. "Did we write that?" "I don't remember that song." Being away from our own material for so long made it seem as if we were seeing someone else's show. Of course there was that fifteen-minute traditional rope pulling dance sequence that we didn't write...and the Sultan's son flying around the stage while singing about sailing on the sea...but still...we were enraptured. We never saw the finale because it took ten minutes for us to get from our seats to the backstage area where we were to join the cast for our bows. From the stage, we giddily watched as the Emir gave us a standing ovation. And if the Emir likes, everyone likes. He's a little like Ben Brantley that way.

The producers were ecstatic. They talked about taking the show to London, to New York, to Cairo! We were so happy that we momentarily forgot about our final payment.

Back in New York, we waited and waited. Frantic emails flew back and forth. Anxious phone calls to answering machines




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unanswered. Wire transfers were faxed with wrong bank numbers. Then the emails, faxes and phones went silent. Our producers had folded their tents and tip-toed into the desert, never to be heard from again.

Was that it? Sure, we had forged a great friendship and collaboration. Yes, we wrote a great show so big it would never be performed again. But the feeling of not being paid in full left us with a sour taste in our mouth. What to do?

Slowly, but inevitably, we realized that maybe art imitates Arabs. Of course. We would write a musical about two short Jews who are put together to write the first American musical to premiere in the Middle East. The Road to Qatar! Bob and Bing hit the desert and it hits right back. So our story ends where it began. With a musical and a moral.

The moral? Write what you know. And get a good website! 

Stephen Cole is an award-winning musical theatre writer. His work includes After The Fair, The Night Of The Hunter, Saturday Night At Grossinger's, Dodsworth, and Casper. Stephen and composer David Krane were commissioned to write the first American musical to premiere in the Middle East and the result was Aspire. Their amazing and hilarious cross-cultural experiences resulted in a musical about the creation of the show entitled The Road To Qatar.