

# **The Making of Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS**

by M. Marlin White

## INTRODUCTION

*Director: Cut.*

*Female Lead: You tasted like brownies.*

*Male Lead: I know. I ate one right before this.*

It was in this moment that I knew I was growing up.

*Question Running Through My Head:* Can it still be considered Children's Theater if the two leads in the show are actually kissing each other? I mean, yes, it's still considered an innocent stage kiss, but that's only because they were on a stage. THEIR LIPS WERE ACTUALLY TOUCHING.

There was no turning the back in front of the audience to hide the kiss, no putting thumbs on the other's lips to keep that as a barrier as the two "kiss," and there was definitely no blackout to let the audience assume that the kiss happened.

I had grown up, and the stage kisses were now real kisses.

*→I was going into my third year of high school, and finishing up one of my last summers with my high school's Children's Theater Program, so I was definitely not a child, however, this was still shocking to me.*

Fortunately, I'm pretty sure that this rehearsal of seeing the con man kissing the poor librarian, may have later went on to spark the idea for what has now become *Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS*.

So—grab some coffee, let the 76 trombones fade to the background, and enjoy this read!

## THE IDEA

Whether or not the kiss I witnessed in this particular show (and many more shows to come) actually brought about the idea, it definitely had me thinking of stage kisses and how awkward the whole situation of it is.

An important thing to realize as we get started in all this, is that a good amount of kids growing up in theater have their first kiss on stage. This is usually because young people play characters much older than themselves, and as we all know, adults are obsessed with kissing. Basically, no show can end without a kiss.

However, this whole phenomenon of having a stage kiss be their first kiss is not necessarily to say that theater kids are weird and incapable of finding love outside of the realm of a show. Often times, things just play out where kids will play characters “in love” before they themselves find love—though I will admit, theater kids are pretty weird.

The other strange thing to note about a stage kiss, is that it definitely isn't a “true love's kiss,” as one would expect a first kiss to be. Performers are usually at best kissing someone who is their peer, and at worst kissing someone they are having to pretend to like, all the while secretly despising them inside. (This last part is a bit overdramatic, but hey—theater is dramatic!)

Looking back, I'm actually grateful I didn't get lead roles in some of these shows—and you should be too—mainly because it means not having to lose your “first kiss,” to a

stage kiss! Little did I know, however, that this would all come undone with *SGSK*'s first production, but more on this later!

The important thing accumulated from all this being: real kisses happen on stage, these kisses are awkward and weird, and many kids have their first kiss on stage. In the end though, it's nothing more than a stage kiss.

The idea I then played around with, within this topic for the show, was what if the person having their first kiss on stage becomes enthralled with the other, and becomes emotionally attached and “in love” with them. Of course, for this to work as a comedy, you then have to have the counterpart as being the experienced kisser who's disgusted by the thought of the other becoming attached to them. Based off of this idea, I created Sean and Alexis.

To make things a bit different, too, I switched the normal gender roles that society associates with males and females, and had Sean be the emotional one falling madly in love with Alexis, while Alexis was the strong, independent, and the non-emotional character.

The third character I added within the first ten-minute performance of this show—before it was a full musical—was a therapist character. Because, we all know that Relationship Counselors are a top necessity when dealing with two teens in a complex relationship. The underlying joke being that they aren't actually in a relationship—although if you were to ask Sean, he would immediately beg to differ at this.

From this idea of having Sean's first kiss be a stage kiss, to having him become emotionally attached to the

disinterested Alexis, and finally having them head to Lucinda Lovely's Therapist Office for some poor-quality relationship counseling, I was ready to go with the foundations of what would later become the 90 minute musical of *Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS*.

### SGSK as a MINI-MUSICAL

As I briefly mentioned, or as you may have picked up from reading thus far, the first edition of this show was in fact a mini-musical, being about 10-15 minutes in length.

I was in an advanced theater class where students learned about the directing and production side of theatrical productions. One of the highlights, and big projects of this class, was being able to direct and produce your own 10-15 minute play called a "Brown Bag." So while I would've liked to start off with saying that *Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS* was first titled *Stage Kiss* and was a Brown Bag, I realize that only a select few would get exactly what that meant; hence the explaining.

I had worked on three other Brown Bags besides this one, and they had been Musical Brown Bags as well. Two were shows with existing scripts, in which I was brought onto the team to help create the piano chords, melody, and some lyrics to—and the other was a show I wrote, about a flight attendant with the fear of falling.

The whole concept of having Brown Bags as musicals was a new exciting idea for these productions, because a majority of these productions were plays and had no singing

involved. However, musicals required more work, as you needed someone to teach the music and you needed a way to have accompaniment during the show—not to mention you had to find actors that could sing! (This latter part was not all too hard, as most students at this high school were pretty decent in the three areas of performing: acting, singing, and dancing.)

I had learned enough from taking various singing/musical theater performing classes, as well as working hard on my own time with learning the piano and practicing singing-songwriting, that I was able to not only help create the music for these shows, but I was able to help teach it and play live during the productions!

Through all of this, I learned that I not only loved (and highly preferred) performing in musicals, but that I knew I must be a part of writing and creating them. Because lets face it, plays are boring.

Once I had the idea set for *SGSK* and knew it was going to be mini-musical, I then had to take the concept I had come up with, and make it into a show that retained all the elements of a story, but in only about 10-15 pages—each page equaling about a minute on stage.

I decided that two main characters would be in a therapist office—easy to set up and easy to execute—and would be explaining their story to the therapist, who would be a Relationship Counselor.

The basis being: Sean is head over heels for Alexis and thinks they're in a relationship, Alexis denies they're in a

relationship and thinks Sean is crazy, and the therapist is basically a fraud, not having any idea what she is talking about.

With this, I was able to open with Sean & Alexis singing the title song, have each character sing their own introductory/move the story along type of song, and then close with Sean & Alexis escaping from what turned into a creepy therapist office that they found themselves locked within.

The story was simple, the overall theme was comedic and cute, and the show did a pretty good job at getting the basis of everything across. The most important factor in all of this being that the 2-3 audiences that saw it gave it good reviews—a very crucial thing to take into account when moving forward with any work.

From here, I ended high school the next year having worked on a good number of these mini-musicals, and having Stage Kiss as my favored and preferred self-written piece. I then went on to college the next fall at San Jose State University, and never would have guessed what would eventually come next with this show.

*SIDE NOTE: Although I am not sure if it still is happening to this day, a few years after graduating, I know that this same class kept up with the theme of having musicals in these productions, having at least one planned Musical Brown Bag each year. Not being completely full of myself, but I would like to say, and think, that I was a part of the legacy of bringing this about! (Of course there were other influences involved,*

*and the teams that I worked with are included, but as you will see in the following of this story—where I go, musicals follow!)*

### **SPOTLITE Stage Company**

When I started off school at SJSU, one of my goals as a new commuter student was to join a club or two on campus in order to meet new people and make new friends. Because of this, I went to the club fair on campus and walked through tons of tables and people, hoping to find some that interested me and worked with my schedule.

I eventually came across one that was titled, SPOTLITE, which was a student run theater production company—or in simpler terms, a theater club. I talked with the officers at the table, got some good information, and went on my way—eventually becoming a part of the club as a member, or Resident Artist, as it was more officially known.

For whatever reason, I was fresh off of getting *SGSK* performed as a mini-musical, and was more than eager for the possibility of finding a new group to perform my work (or really any outlet that would be able to help produce self-written work.)

I ended up bringing and turning in a printed out version of the mini-musical, and basically said that it'd be awesome if the club could find a way to perform it. The club was very encouraging toward finding student work and helping get it produced on stage, so I thought I might as well try early on!

After I turned it in, which would've been towards the beginning of the fall semester, I went on to being a continued

member of the club, and basically forgot about the show. Little did I know, however, that the coming December would be an exciting jump-start to this show coming to life!

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In December, a few of the club officers came to me and asked if I was interested in taking my mini-musical and making it into a full length show to then be performed for their spring production. I, of course, was super shocked at this proposal but definitely excited about the very thought of it!

I expressed my interest in the offer, worked out a few more details of how it would all be run, and then was given the task of spending my winter break—the whole month of January, free of school—to complete it all. I really had no idea how to begin the process, but I knew that I would make it happen and be on top of getting the project and task completed!

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After this was all finished, I discovered that while there was interest in doing the theme and topic of the show, another factor to it getting chosen was that the club really didn't have any other submissions to choose from.

It didn't necessarily matter to me the process of how it got chosen, but rather the result that came from it—being that I got to have my first musical performed and eventually published!

Lesson Learned: Take every opportunity to submit your work, because there's always a chance something can be done

with it—even if it is solely because there was nothing else to choose from!

*SIDE NOTE: This club had also never done a musical before and was looking to break into doing something new and different. WHICH—plays back into how I said, “where I go, musicals follow!” On top of this being the first musical the club had done, it was also the first full length musical to be done through the college's Theater Program in many, many years—making the whole project even more exciting.*

### **BECOMING a PLAYWRIGHT**

When I was approached to turn my mini-show into a full length musical, I really had no idea how exactly I would go about extending it, the time it would take, or even if I would be able to pull it off—but what I did know was that I was up for the challenge and extremely excited to have this new opportunity.

In getting started with everything, I knew that I would need to be very diligent with getting things accomplished and in making sure that I would have it done in time for the production team. One of my worst fears during this time, which I had many dreams about, included either procrastinating until there was no time left, or having writer's block where I mentally would not be able to complete the show. In either case, this would not only tarnish my name, but it would leave SPOTLITE without any material to produce and put on as their main stage spring show.

To prevent these fears from becoming a reality, I decided I would first start out with creating an outline, as well as a list of various ideas, of where I thought the show would go. At this point, I was in the mid weeks of December and was working at a pop-up Christmas store at the local mall. In the down time of non-busy hours, I would work behind the front desk at not only brainstorming on blank sheets of paper, but at dividing up what I thought would be the various scenes of the show.

The hardest part in this creative stage was being able to think big and be creative, but also keep in mind that the budget we had to work with was not huge and that it would take place in the university's black box theater. This meant that scene changes and big scenery to be used in the different settings would be limited and hard to pull off.

What I found though, after completing what we performed that spring, was that although I had a set plan of where I was headed, my writing kind of took a journey and path on its own. It sounds cheesy to say it, and I don't think I would completely believe it unless it was something that I actually got to experience. Not only did the characters in my show "come to life," but I would argue that the story kind of took over and wrote itself.

In saying this, I mean that the set paths I had written down in that tiny little Christmas store, eventually became skewed as the story made little changes here and there. The overarching storyline, which I had planned, did for the most part come true—but a huge element to the ending that came

about was a twist that I must say, I had no idea where it came from.

*TWISTS: Though this is my first published and lengthier works, I would like to think that some of the best and most unexpected twists truly do come from within the story itself, and by having the story show and create its own path when it comes to this.*

As I was nearing the end of the story and had just gotten over the twist—or should I say twists (where we learn that the Therapist is not only a fraud, but that she has drugged Sean & Alexis and is selling them to their director who turns out to be a Russian drug lord) I realized that the story was able to resolve itself on its own and come to a conclusion that not only I was happy with, but that the show itself was happy with.

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The final scenes were some of my favorite to write, not only because I was coming to the end of the story and accomplishing what I had set out to do, but because I was just so fond of how the characters and show ended up.

I went on a long journey with the characters, and by the end of the show, I knew them extremely well and was somewhat proud of all they had accomplished.

As mad as it sounds, when you are creating characters, you are creating lives that will be brought to life by actors. So while I am personifying them in a way that sounds quite strange, it actually makes complete sense to feel this way—or at least as an author/playwright it does.

Regardless, it was with the completion of writing the first draft of the script that I was now officially a Playwright and extremely excited to see my written work come to life!

### AUDITIONS & PRACTICES

With the script ready to go, I came back to school to start the spring semester, and the production team and myself went straight into auditions!

Usually, auditions for SPOTLITE were held on their own and were not a part of the Theater Department's Auditions—however, this was a special exception and myself, the director, and the stage manager all got to sit in the main theater and be a part of casting performers from the school's theater population. (An impressive and exciting accomplishment on its own!)

The tricky part came in that the auditions for all the other shows did not require singing, meaning that the auditioning performers did not have to present a song. This meant that we had to ask performers how comfortable they were with singing, i.e. could they sing.

From here, we then had callbacks with a selected group of performers a few days later, which really became more of our Vocal Auditions and our chance to see who could sing—or at least have the potential to be able to sing. This was the other challenging aspect on top of all this, in that SJSU is not a musical theater school and therefore does not attract many musical theater trained people in general.

While this was one of the scarier aspects of the show for myself—working with a wide range of very new to moderately trained singers—all of the performers grew immensely in strengthening their vocal skills and abilities throughout the time we had together, and we were able to pull off the show!

By the time we closed, we ended with a cast in which audience members wouldn't have been able to guess that a majority of them started as unconfident singers, with very little stage singing experience.

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I touched on it briefly above, but after we got our set performers for the show, we went right on in to practices and bringing my script to life.

The role I most wanted during the production side of things was somewhere between being an Assistant Director and a Creative Director. Basically, I just wanted to make sure that I still had input into how the overall show would turn out.

When someone else takes your work, there's always a bit of an unnerving feeling that things may not come out how you imagined them. Luckily this was not a problem, and either way—I tend to write in a lot of stage directions and input right into my work to help guide the show into being what I imagine it to be.

My positions for the production ended up being those that I listed above, as well as the Vocal Director—an important thing I learned from this production being that I do not like vocal directing, and am really not in a position to do this. (You

live and you learn, so I was glad I was able to figure this out early on in my career!)

We got through our practices and dress rehearsals, and now were ready for the big moment—the very first showings of *Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS*. Only, I forgot to mention one thing: I was to be in the show as the main character, performing in 2 of the 4 performances that our lead actor was unable to attend.

### 2014 PRODUCTION

Although I came into the whole production not wanting to be in the show at all, I found myself at the end glad that I had the chance to. The main reason why I didn't want to be in it was because after all the work I had done with the show itself, I wanted to have the satisfaction of being able to sit back in the audience and enjoy what had come from my imagination—not having to worry about remembering lines, blocking, and entrances.

I did however get to do this, as I got to see the show officially performed twice by the other male lead. It was in these moments of sitting in the audience that I felt so content with what we all created together and were performing for the audience. *If I were a crier, I would have been sobbing like a baby in my seat.*

A strange aspect to the whole production though was that I got comments from multiple people after the show about how they were actually surprised at how well it all came off and about the creation/content of the musical in itself. It

was as if they had never thought that a first year student could come up with something like this and execute it to a professional and staged level.

Though I didn't do the whole thing on my own, I did accomplish quite a bit and still find it funny to this day when I hear and learn of people's disbelief at me exceeding their expectations. And believe me, I am told by even close friends and acquaintances regarding this area!

It may be that I'm doing things that seem too great and big for most people to imagine, or, I may just come across as looking incompetent and like a complete idiot to the average passersby.

Either way, it definitely does not come easy, and in fact takes a whole lot of determination, perseverance, and mental/emotional strength. You also can't forget passion. Without having a passion for all of this, I would not be able to get anywhere near where I am today.

To sum up this chapter—we did the full 90-minute show 4 times, and it came across successfully to the audiences that viewed it. I also acted in it. Meaning I had to end the show in a kiss. A Stage Kiss.

## MY FIRST KISS WENT A LITTLE LIKE—

I was not loud about voicing this to anyone, and did not even tell anyone in the cast or crew, but coming into this show I had never been kissed. I originally thought of the story idea itself and of how it would be funny if this happened, but I was definitely not writing from a standpoint of experiencing this myself.

When I got told by the director of the show that I was needed to fill in as Sean for two of the shows, I immediately thought about this strange occurrence—or rather the strange occurrence that I would be coming across, just as so many other theater kids have come across. I would be having my first kiss on stage.

### HERE WE GO:

*Original Actor finishes running through the show at our run-through as the character Sean.*

*Its now my turn to run through the show, but I have never walked through the last ending scene where the kiss and finale of the show happens.*

*The director makes the decision that we will run through this scene first, before we start at the top.*

*We get set up for the kissing scene, we say the lines leading up to the kiss, we lean in—and in a failed trying to draw Alexis' head to mine for the kiss, I end up slapping/hitting her in the head. (Talk about EMBARRASSING. And SCARY. But also looking back, HILARIOUS.)*

*We laughed it off, and I quickly apologized before we then set back up.*

*We then started over with the lines, leaned in—and kissed; my first kiss.*

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It was very soon after this kiss that I then came back to the thought of how weird stage kisses were. My thoughts looking something like this:

*Sean 1 kissed Alexis, and then right after I (Sean 2) kissed Alexis. Alexis in real life has her own boyfriend that she kisses, and Sean 1 has his own boyfriend that he kisses. Therefore I (Sean 2) am caught in between a kissing web where there are a total of five lips kissing—four pairs of boy lips and one set of girl lips.*

*I HOPE I DON'T GET SICK.*

## AFTERWARD

I hope you've enjoyed reading about what went into creating *Sean Gibbs' STAGE KISS*, and the process that myself and the show took. We not only got it performed, but we are also fully published!

Before I died (back to the dramatics), I knew that I wanted to publish this show and give other people the chance at performing it. On Thanksgiving Day of 2016—two years later—I was finally able to do this! After the years I have spent on this show, which also included hiring and working alongside an Arranger for a year leading up to its publishing, I am ecstatic, excited, and extremely proud of all that has been accomplished.

Although it would seem as though I am completely done with this show, this is really only the beginning, as I must now take the show on its journey of getting performed by other theater companies and having it gain credibility.

My goal is to have it performed as a published piece within a year, or at least get picked up in a year of its publishing—so if it all goes as planned, then we should be seeing Sean Gibbs back up on stage in no time!

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