

In the spring of 1996 three men set off on a road trip to Civil War battlefields in Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Author Gregory Boyd, composer Frank Wildhorn, and lyricist Jack Murphy spent many long days trudging through Fredericksburg, Antietam and Gettysburg, as well as the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond.

Though this trio (two of whom, Mr. Boyd and Mr. Wildhorn, created the Broadway hit, *Jekyll and Hyde*) might have appeared to be on an educational holiday, they were actually researching a new musical. For in their preliminary discussions, they'd discovered a shared interest in America's Civil War - an intellectual passion, they agreed, which was greatly increased by Ken Burns' PBS-TV documentary.

And so it was that a pilgrimage was planned, and a long look given to other fictions and narratives inspired by the Civil War. Most notably, they considered "Gone With the Wind", "Uncle Tom's Cabin", and the Broadway musical *Shenandoah*. Almost immediately, the men decided that they had no desire to create yet another fiction with America's greatest conflict as merely historical "backdrop" - what Mr. Boyd termed a "soap opera romance". Rather, they envisioned a show, what eventually would be called THE CIVIL WAR, in which the voices of average men and women from the 19th century would be heard for the first time.

"We found, as Mr. Burns has proven, the most material was written by those who'd lived through the war or, indeed, had died during it," said Mr. Boyd. "We wanted to do this from the point of view of common people."

Those days of traversing battlefields, of walking where thousands of men fell and died, was quite a harrowing experience, admitted composer Frank Wildhorn. "At the end of each day, I just had to run to my piano." In fact, the first song he wrote became the lament of a confederate soldier, "I'll Never Pass This Way Again".

"We didn't want to make it a history lesson," said lyricist Jack Murphy, "but to put a human face on everything. Soldiers and

their wives or parents at this time wrote straight from the heart, and what they said still rings so true. Their honesty gave me the emotional compass I used to write the lyrics.”

Something of the American character, of our national destiny, was formed in the Civil War, the men agreed, but we’ve become fractured from this, as our country’s concerns have become both more global and more politically petty. Delving deeper into newspaper accounts, letters and diaries of this period, Mr. Boyd, Mr. Wildhorn and Mr. Murphy began to have a peculiar sense that these words from so long ago were actually directed at them. They found themselves immensely moved by finding a higher ideal of what this country was, and could be.

“This discovery formed the whole structure of the show,” said Mr. Boyd. “We decided we wouldn’t tell our audience what to feel, but we could show how these people who lived in the past felt. As such, we decided we wouldn’t do this play *for* an audience, but *with* an audience.”

While continuing their research, Mr. Wildhorn began to write music, and came up with ten different melodic themes. Each motif summoned a different type of individual: a young Minnesota wife worrying about her husband gone to war, a Confederate captain, a slave couple in Georgia, and many more. Given this wealth of voices, a decision was made early on that THE CIVIL WAR couldn’t be a traditional musical, with a book that neatly follows two or three characters, with obvious protagonists or antagonists. Instead, a diverse cast of characters who might never have met in real life would be held together like pieces in a mosaic.

“We wanted to honor the hearts and souls of all these people who came before us,” said Mr. Wildhorn. “The phrase we came up with at the time,” said Mr. Boyd, “was that we were trying to create an emotional landscape.” He mentioned the original production of *Hair*, or the more recent *Bring in ‘da Noise, Bring in ‘da Funk*, as examples of shows that were also “non-traditional musicals.

Since what musicians do best is express human emotion, the songs in THE CIVIL WAR speak basically for themselves, without much expository dialogue to provide segues or set-ups. At different times, the creators used phrases such as a “theatrical concert”, a “pop oratorio”, or even a “song cycle”, to describe a show packed with 28 songs, written in a variety of styles from folk to rock, from gospel to rhythm and blues. “The music is all very American,” said composer Frank Wildhorn. “I hope we’ve created a bridge, a look at how a vocabulary of voices and sounds from then has become the music of our times.”

Lyricist Jack Murphy likes to think of the show as a drawer full of old family snapshots. “No matter who you are, you will recognize someone, or a piece of someone in many of these pictures,” he said. While all have their own intrinsic interest, inevitably certain songs speak more powerfully to certain types of audiences. “Judgment Day”, Mr. Murphy said, is popular with men who’ve served in the armed forces. Mothers like “Five Boys”, women respond to “Sarah” and “Honor of Your Name”.

What made this somewhat elliptical, even impressionistic, style of storytelling possible is that audiences coming into the theater already have the musical’s “back story” in their hearts and minds. “People have a sense, either sophisticated or not, of what the Civil War was,” said Mr. Boyd. “They know there was an enormous loss of lives, that brother fought against brother and, in the process, the notion of what this country was simply blew apart.”

They also can be relied on, of course, to know a little something about such personages as Abraham Lincoln, General Ulysses S. Grant, or General Robert E. Lee. Still, Mr. Boyd, Mr. Wildhorn and Mr. Murphy chose not to “musicalize” these men as “in doing so, we ran the danger of seeming absurd. It might even have become unintentionally funny,” said Mr. Boyd.

Indeed, the only figure from history that is given a speaking voice is Frederick Douglass, a slave turned impassioned orator. “When you read his words and his speeches, you can see this is a modern mind talking,” said Mr. Boyd. “There’s a moment in the

show when Douglass reads from 'The Declaration of Independence', which was almost 100 years old at that time. Douglass asks, 'Do we really believe this? Or, do we believe that what's written here is simply not applicable to black people?' It was this question, still unanswered in some ways today, that provided our motivation for producing a show called THE CIVIL WAR."

"In some ways we have progressed, but then you read about a church being burned, or a murder, and you know we still have a ways to go," said Mr. Wildhorn. "We hope we've set up an entertaining way for mixed audiences to share who they are, and why they are. These are steps in a healing process that are badly needed because of the wounds this country's race relations still have from the Civil War."