
IN CONVERSATION WITH John Kander & Stephen Flaherty

One of my goals since becoming Director of Education & Outreach here at the Dramatists Guild was to start a seminar series that matched one wonderful writer with another wonderful writer so that they could embark on a conversation. Not an interview, but a true collaborative meeting of the minds. I think we've done it. After much discussion, DuoLogues was finally born May 16, 2007. Our first event paired the phenomenally successful and even more phenomenally terrific gentlemen, John Kander and Stephen Flaherty.

Held after the opening of Kander's Curtains and before Flaherty's new musical The Glorious Ones, this conversation was an insightful and fascinating start to this new seminar series and was enjoyed by many Dramatists Guild members. The following transcript has been edited with the assistance of all participants. I, for one, look forward to many more DuoLogue events to come.

-TARI STRATTON

Director of Education & Outreach

STEPHEN FLAHERTY: I have to say I was thrilled when I got the call from Tari Stratton at the Dramatists Guild. She wanted composers speaking to composers, and playwrights speaking to playwrights. She said, "Is there anyone that you would absolutely love to have a conversation with?" I don't think I waited two seconds. I said, "It has to be John Kander."

When I saw *Curtains*, I was so excited because it's the real thing. Besides it being an original musical with an original score, it's not a musical that is a satire of itself. It doesn't elbow itself. It felt like what a classic Broadway musical is, and can be.

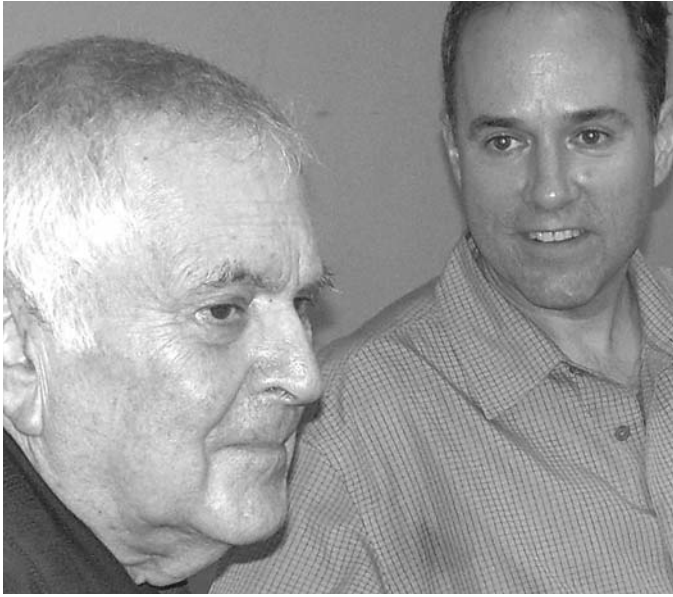
In so many of your scores there is such a strong element of performance. From *Cabaret*, where Sally Bowles is a performer, to *Chicago*, where it's about vaudeville, to *Curtains*, where there is a show within the show. There are a lot of performers in these pieces. Is the subject what draws you, or do you feel that your writing is so performer oriented that you need a story with a strong performance element to support what you do?

JOHN KANDER: This piece was started so long ago that it's really hard to describe the original impetus for it. As far as the performing aspect of this piece, several things obtain. Anybody who ever saw my collaborator, Fred Ebb, knows what an incredible performer he was. I think a lot of that aspect of the show comes from that performer's killer instinct that Fred really had. We seem to have, without ever thinking about it, written a lot of shows which involve performing. *Cabaret* was in a style in which performers could break the fourth wall and sing directly to

the audience. It was the same with *Chicago*, and with *70 Girls 70*. I don't think we ever meant to. We never sat down and said, "This is what we like to do." However, it certainly affected the way that we wrote, and the people that we worked with. What is it about writing or performing that makes it an appealing subject matter for writers?

SF: I think, for me, it's about the creative spirit. That thing that makes you get up every morning and commit to what it is that you do. There's actually a song in *The Glorious Ones* called "I Was Here". It's really about anybody. Why does anyone strive to leave something perfect in the world, or leave their mark on the world? I think that there is a basic need to leave something behind for future generations. I feel very fortunate that I'm writing for the theatre. This is the thing that most excites me. I think the creative spirit, and how one's personal life feeds one's creative life and vice versa, is a really interesting thing for me to write about.

JK: At least one thing we have in common with these pieces is that they are both love letters to the theatre, to the theatrical experience itself. I must say, the older I get, which is getting to be pretty old, I am more and more in love with the theatre. As the world around me becomes more and more corrupt, and more tragic, I take a refuge in working in the theatre. I was on a panel with Audra McDonald, and she mentioned the fact that her father had died in an airplane crash while she was in *110 In The Shade*. She went home, she went to the funeral, and then she said she fled back, as fast as she could, to the safety of the theatre. I know what she means.



JOHN KANDER & STEPHEN FLAHERTY

SF: I heard from a friend, who saw the performance when Audra came back; he said it was one of the most astonishing performances he's ever seen. There wasn't any tentativeness. Maybe she was honoring her father by throwing herself full throttle into the theatre.

We were in rehearsal for *Dessa Rose* at Lincoln Center in January of 2005, and on the third day of rehearsal I found out that my father had suddenly passed away, virtually within an hour of the first "come home" call. It was a shock to go so quickly from one extreme to the other, from something that I was so excited to be working on something that was personally such an upheaval for my family and me. I had to, obviously, leave the rehearsal and go and spend time at home and see my family through that experience. Coming back to New York, and then back to rehearsal, I remember feeling grateful that I had something into which I could put every single emotion that I had. Whatever would come up, I could put it in the piece. It was an incredibly supportive and safe environment, filled with people that loved me. I felt so grateful for that. It made me want to do better than I had ever done at that point, to honor my father.

JK: We have a certain small family of people that we like to work with, and there is a wonderful safety in that. Some people might say that's not very adventurous, but I think they're absolutely wrong. I think security breeds creative adventure. In *Curtains*, there are many people that I've worked with often, and walking into that room every day you know that you are allowed to be whoever you are. I wrote a quatrain at the end of *Curtains*, which I found myself believing as I was writing it.

There's a special kind of people known as show people.
We live in a world full of dreams.
Sometimes we're not too certain what's false and what's real.
But we're seldom in doubt about how we feel.

SF: I found it incredibly moving that you completed a lot of Fred's lyrics in *Curtains*. I particularly loved "I Miss the Music," the song that the composer (played by Jason Danieley) sings about his writing partner. I found out that you had written the entire lyric yourself. It's so to the point, and so full of emotion and wisdom. I kept thinking that must have been a song that took you 40 years of collaboration to be able to write that well. I was really impressed by that.

JK: Well, thank you for that. Interestingly enough, it's a song that I thought I was writing for the character. I was just being professional, writing for the character, and Jason said, "Don't be silly. It's all about Fred."

SF: Wow. I have to say there are certain parts of that song that really hit me. I especially loved the middle section, which I understand was a newer addition to the score.

JK: Originally, the song had been quite short. Once Jason opened my eyes to what I was really doing, I wrote a section about writing, collaborating, and then about not having a collaborator. It turned out to say things that I didn't know I felt.

SF: The bridge ends with this great line about collaboration, "You make me better than I am." I wanted to talk to you about that. A good collaboration is like any good marriage. You don't want to overanalyze it. You don't want to question it. You just feel lucky. But do you feel that synergy of working with a partner does make you better than you are?

JK: I think it not only makes you better than you are, it creates another person. I've said this before: Fred and I were very different people. When we came together to write what came out was this third person called Kander and Ebb. I don't know who that person is, actually. Often composers would come to us and say, "Wait 'til you hear this, I just wrote a real Kander and Ebb song." They would play it, and we had no idea what they were talking about. I don't think I would recognize a "Kander and Ebb song" if it hit me in the face.

SF: I want to ask you about when you first wrote together. On the first day, when you closed the door after you were introduced, what was your process like?

JK: This is going to sound really phony. When we first started to write, we began to collaborate in a way that was perfectly natural to us, and it stayed exactly the same way.

SF: Really?

JK: For 40 years we both improvised together. Fred could improvise with rhyme and meter the same way that I could improvise at a keyboard. We would overlap, and build a song together. First we would talk about what we wanted to say, or we would talk about the character, what they really felt. One of us, usually Fred, would

come up with a phrase, or I would come up with a rhythm, and we would start building it at the same time. It's not something I would advise anybody else to do. It just worked that way with us. I would say that 95 percent of what we wrote was written in that fashion. The amazing thing is, as different as we were, as thin skinned as we both were, when we were working together we could say anything.

SF: I was going to ask you about the whole concept of criticism within a partnership. You felt so comfortable that you could say whatever would come up.

JK: In the creative process, absolutely anything. It sounds really fake, but we never had a quarrel. We would write a lot of shit because we wrote really fast, but we would tear up really fast, too.

SF: How would you know when to tear up, and when to just move something to the side?

JK: There's the 24 hour test. I would go over there at about 10:00, and we would work probably five hours everyday. We would play something that we had written the day before, and both of us would recoil in horror. We were both ruthless in that regard. I don't think we were very self deceptive. The thing that saved all that was that the process was always fun. I don't know how to explain this. It was always a good time. If we had to tear up a song and write another one, it wasn't a punishment.

SF: Lynn [Ahrens] and I also like to write in the same room at the same time. We don't do that exclusively, but we certainly rack up a lot of hours with the two of us at the piano working through ideas.

JK: Do you talk a lot first?

SF: We talk so much, until we can't talk anymore. At that point, somebody has to do something. We have talked about the situation, the character, the emotion, the approach, and the intent. I think that's the only way to get two writers together on exactly the same beam. We're basically driving the same vehicle. I have one hand on the wheel, and Lynn has the other. We can only see ten feet ahead, and we're trying to navigate. In the early days it was an interesting thing. I had come to New York in the fall of '82, fresh out of college with my dark turtleneck and full beard. I was a "serious musician." I scored everything out on paper, in the classical tradition. I was used to locking myself in a room and waiting for my muse to hit me. Lynn came from a much more improvisatory background, from the world of commercial music. So she was used to going into a room and throwing around an idea.

We were from totally different backgrounds, but there was something really exciting for me about taking a new approach. I remember the very first time Lynn and I wrote a song, it was an assignment in a songwriting workshop. She said, "Okay, so make something up." I wasn't used to just instantly creating in front of another person. I felt it was very revealing. I was used to locking

my door, but I actually found this new way of writing very liberating. It was a challenge, but I loved it. It was almost like a dare. The interesting thing is that, over the years I think Lynn has come more to my side, and I have come more to hers.

JK: How did she come more to your side? What do you mean?

SF: I mean the idea of studying the architecture of music, of the song, and thinking structurally. Being intuitive but also knowing how to build on those ideas. I know that that's something we've really developed as a team: creating the elements of the song, and knowing how to best develop the musical and dramatic motifs. The repetition of a certain word or musical idea that defines a section, which then defines a song, which then defines a larger section of music.

JK: Don't you think that simply comes from experience? I know that when we started, we were writing the basic formal song form without thinking about it. We tend to write in forms that we know, but the more experience you have, the more expansive the work becomes. Certainly I know your work and how wonderfully expansive it is, and Fred and I also became more formally experimental and expansive. I think that maybe just comes with confidence in each other.

SF: It also comes from wanting to try new things. I realized early on that you can't do everything you want to do artistically, and you can't say everything that you want to say in any one piece. The first piece that Lynn and I had produced was a farce called *Lucky Stiff*. It was a very silly, sharp, fast-moving piece, and it had no emotional content at all. It was great fun, but at the same time I had several years of emotion locked inside of me. I realized that to add any real emotion to that particular piece would not be successful. I said to Lynn, "I don't care what the next piece that we do is, but I just have to have something lyrical." I remember reading an early review for *Lucky Stiff*, and one critic said, "It's a shame Mr. Flaherty can't write any ballads." I was yearning to write a ballad, but you can't write a ballad in a comedy. If you get the audience, and it shakes them, and it moves them, you can't get them to laugh again. You've derailed the audience.

JK: Well, you're one of the most lyrical composers around.

SF: It's interesting, I had been writing these very dark, overly serious with a capital "S" kind of projects in college. Everything that Lynn and I first began working on, however, were all light comedies. Our first project was a musical adaptation of the film *Bedazzled*, which was sketch comedy. *Lucky Stiff* was farce, and then we briefly worked with George C. Wolfe, on another unproduced comedy. I think *Once On This Island* combined more of an emotional underpinning with the exuberance of some of the earlier work. That was also the first piece that I got to really experiment with another musical world. I was trying to juggle all these different elements from world music, but yet make it my music, and do something personal with it. I wonder if that's something

that you could speak to about *Cabaret*?

JK: “Research” sounds awfully dry, but you do do research. With *Cabaret*, I listened to lots and lots of German jazz of the ‘20s. Then I simply forgot about it with the hope that what I had been listening to would seep up through me and come out as me, with those influences simply there rather than ever trying to starkly imitate something. Was that your experience?

SF: Whenever I hear the score of *Cabaret*, I hear your voice. Obviously, it’s filtered through a German sensibility, but it’s John Kander’s music. It’s not Kurt Weill’s music. It really has your sensibility, your sounds. I think it’s the fact that it is your music, that it feels fresh. It’s really stood the test of time.

With *Once On This Island*, one of the big issues for me was: did I have permission to write that particular show? Did I have permission to write from a culture that was not mine?

JK: How did you study it?

SF: At the time I was listening, for pleasure, to a lot of world music. My listening in general is very eclectic. I grew up listening to mostly R&B & Motown. I studied classical piano. I worked in Nashville for a summer, where I discovered bluegrass and gospel. I put myself through college, playing in a ragtime band. Then world music was coming out, in the mid-80s. Paul Simon had just come out with *Graceland*, which was his fusion album and which greatly impressed me. He basically used his New York sensibility, and melded it with the bass lines and rhythms of South African music and Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s vocal textures. I think those sorts of experiments emboldened me.

JK: But when it came to writing, were you consciously using those models, or were you just doing what comes naturally?

SF: I think with any show, that the original music impulse is my own. I don’t want to be a musicologist. I don’t want to do too much study at first. I want some pure reaction to come out, my musical reaction to the story, to the characters. That happens, but then I do a lot of research. One of the things I was listening to was recordings of Haitian drum patterns, Voodoo patterns, which must have horrified my neighbors. “He’s playing that Voodoo drum music again!” Each of these gods had a different rhythmic pattern, which is fascinating. I’m not a drummer, I’m a keyboardist. So it was doubly challenging because this was a show that didn’t want to be written at the keyboard. I found that I would sometimes get too clever, if I were sitting at my piano with my ten fingers. I’d go into my European way of playing. It would not be something indigenous to these people, who wouldn’t have a keyboard in the other room necessarily. I found that I had to, after a certain while, totally get away from my keyboard, and try to find a new way into the piece. A lot of that was through rhythm. I was literally walking around Manhattan, in rhythm, thinking of the rhythms of the piece. I wouldn’t go too far from my apartment, so if I had a great idea I’d be able to get myself back in time to record it. It was, basically, a

five block pattern. Once, I must have been singing as I was going along, not realizing it. This man on the street said, “You go. You keep singing. Even if somebody tells you you can’t.” This confused me. I thought, “Does that mean that I can’t sing? He’s telling me that, but go on anyway, brother?” Or was it “don’t let anybody stop you in your pursuit of your artistic path?” I don’t know what it meant, but it keyed me in early on that, for me personally, there had to be different approaches to different pieces, depending on what the subject was.

JK: You’re bringing up another whole subject, which is the subject of writing while you’re crossing the street. I know exactly what you’re talking about. Music goes on in your head all the time. That’s something that you have to understand with crazy people like us. There’s no way to turn it off.

SF: It’s in the background.

JK: We’re having a conversation, but I’m sure you’re hearing something, and I am too. It isn’t what you want to hear, it isn’t any good. It’s just that it’s going on, and you cannot turn it off. If you’re working on something in your head, walking along the street and singing, or tapping, or whatever you can have many near-death experiences.

SF: Lynn always worries about me. Once, she saw me crossing the street, and she was on the other side and yelled out, “Stephen! Look out!”

JK: Tell me about what you hear in the radio that’s going on in your head.

SF: Sometimes it’s very silly things. If I’m fascinated by an interval, or a certain series of notes, then I tend to just twist them around. I put them upside down, put it in retrograde, put it this way, or that way. I just try to see how many variations of these notes there are.

JK: That’s conscious. I’m talking about the unconscious part, the stuff that’s going on in the back.

SF: Usually I have to relate it to something. I know when I was beginning to work on *Ragtime*, there was a literary treatment that I was given. The assignment was to write four songs on spec in order to get the job, to get the opportunity to write the score. There was one particular passage that Terrence McNally had written in his treatment that fascinated me. It was the scene of a little boy watching a ragtime pianist. Nothing musically came from me for the longest time. I had put myself in the character, in the head of the ragtime pianist. So I was sitting at my piano, trying to be him, and all of a sudden it dawned on me: I was in the wrong character’s mind. I should be the little boy. So I switched it around. I was the little boy looking at the piano, looking at the pianist’s hands. What did his hands look like? How many notes could he hold? How did his hands move? Were they calloused?

Then finally, the fingers began to move, and the opening notes of the show came to me very quickly and fully.

Before Lynn and I began working in earnest, I just tried to create a series of musical sketches. I don't know if you work that way, where you think, "This is a theme. This sounds like Coalhouse and Sarah. This sounds like something Tateh can sing, the immigrant. This is the kind of parlor music the mother might listen to. Maybe she would sing along with this." I just created a series of sketches. It was interesting to see how many of these wound up in the piece.

"New Music" is quite a long song. It starts as a solo, becomes a duo, becomes a trio, becomes a quartet, a quintet, and has a second duet in the center. It has quite a grand architecture to it. That was a song that I started in the middle, not at the beginning. I started with Coalhouse and Sarah, this little kernel of an idea that I'd written for them as one of the sketches. It's the part where Sarah sings, "You and your music." It's a duet going back and forth, calling to one another. That was the first music written. Then I wrote to the front and to the back of the song. Sometimes music is interesting in how it reveals itself. It doesn't always start at the beginning, sometimes it starts in the middle.

JK: With me, my fingers will often have minds of their own. If I'm thinking about a character, or what we are trying to say, and I just put my hand on the piano, it will do something. It will do something in the character of what I'm writing. In no way, and this is a shameful thing to admit, in no way am I guiding it. It's like automatic writing, in a funny way. I did not tell them to play that B natural. I think, for a lot of us, the keyboard is just simply another way of speaking. It's been my friend since I was four. Your hands just do it, and sometimes you have to trust that that will happen. It doesn't mean that every song's gonna come out any good, but you have to be free enough. . . Maybe that's the big word for both of us. You have to be free enough to let it happen.

SF: I actually love your word free, because I think that means emotionally free as well as intellectually free. I bring this up because this is a roundabout way to pay John a compliment. When Lynn and I were first working as a collaborative team, we participated here in the Dramatists Guild musical development program. This is where we would present early works to a panel. John was on many of those panels. I remember working on some of these early shows, and trying to work up to the big soaring moment at the end. I remember nine times out of ten times, John would say to me, "Well, you really had me, but at the end, it just didn't quite open enough," or "it didn't quite go far enough," or "it didn't quite land in the way that I think it could." I thought I was being so huge. I think maybe, at that point in my life, I wasn't emotionally free enough to do that. Jump cut to *Ragtime*, and so many notices that were written about the score, and even Forbidden Broadway's parody of the score was about, "All the songs end so big!" That made me so joyful, because I thought, "Ah, that's great. John would be so proud."

JK: I admired that score enormously. I saw the show over and over again. Talk about soaring and being free, you really did it.

SF: I think it's really challenging to be emotionally free and intellectually engaging at the same time. I think *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has so many moments like that. That's such a great example of a score that has classic songs that you want to hear over and over again. At the same time, there are larger structures, and some really adventuresome choral writing that weaves in and out of the songs.

I have to tell you, I had seen the version of *Spider Woman* that you did up in Purchase. Then I saw it in previews on Broadway. It was astounding to me the amount of work that you did re-conceiving the flow and texture of the show. I couldn't believe the amount of great work you did using the same collaborators on the same project.

JK: I think one of the lucky things about it, was that we had a year to be away from it. When we came back, we were able to start with the lessons learned from the mistakes that we had made before. That brings up an anecdote which actually involves you. With Hal Prince, we started a series of works at Purchase. There were going to be four projects, and each of them would be given full productions. There would be exchange with the audience, and we would learn about our piece. From that experience, we would be able to go back and rewrite. The most important thing was that these were not to be reviewed. We were first up at bat, with *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. *My Favorite Year* was-

SF: We were in the wings.

JK: The New York Times decided that since we were all so "eminent," they had to review it. This was Terrence, Fred and me, and Hal Prince, and they decided somehow that this was a really important thing to do. Seventeen of us, including Peter Stone who was then the president of the Guild, went down to the New York Times to beg them not to do this. They did it anyway. They came and they destroyed the piece, and in so doing, they destroyed the project. Now we were the lucky ones, because we had our experience. We learned what the problem was, or at least thought we did. A year later, we were able to rewrite it, having had that experience, and bring in a piece that I'm really proud of.

SF: It's so hard to get every single element perfectly balanced the first time out. You have to deal with the sound, orchestration, structure, and staging. There were great things in *Spider Woman* the first time out. Then you went to London?

JK: We went to Canada.

SF: Oh, you went to Canada.

JK: With our favorite producer.

SF: Our friend, Garth.

JK: Garth Dabrinsky, he's a Canadian producer who is, how should we put this, who has some legal difficulties which prevent him from entering this country.

SF: Right, but he's the most passionate, creative producer.

JK: One of the best producers, I'm sure, that either of us has ever had, and wonderful to creative people. We went to Toronto, and had redone the piece. We mounted it there, then we went to London with it, and then came into New York.

SF: That's such a path for a particular piece. When it came into New York, it felt not only fully fledged, but every artistic and creative choice felt inevitable. It felt like there could have been no other choice for this moment.

JK: But that can only happen if you get to play your piece in front of an audience. How was your experience with *Ragtime* in that regard?

SF: It was wonderful. *Ragtime* is a piece that we started, again, in Toronto. We worked on it in front of the audience during the Toronto run: creating new songs, focusing sequences, adding texture to certain characters, and certain parts of the show. Garth decided that he would build a new theatre for the show in New York. So while we were waiting for the Ford Center (now the Hilton) to be built, we opened another company in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, we retooled the whole Atlantic City sequence in Act II. By the time we came to New York, it was January of 1998. This was a piece that debuted in '96, so that was quite a long out-of-town tryout!

JK: An out-of-town try out is something you rarely get to have these days. One of the first things that Rupert Holmes did, when he took over the book of *Curtains*, was to put it in 1959 because we're dealing with a show which is out of town, which is working on itself. That is the theatre that I grew up in, where you could go to Philadelphia. You could go to Boston. You could go to New Haven. If it wasn't ready, you would go to another city, and just keep on working on it. You can't do that today. Producers have to find ingenious ways to remove you from New York. It's harder and harder. Fred and I had it really easy, in the early days of our career, because *Cabaret* played several cities. Certainly *Zorba* did, and when you're out of town with a show, you really are working just the way you spoke too. Night after night, you can change what's happening. You can change an orchestration, you can cut a song in half, or you can move a song. You can get rid of whole scenes and put them back again. You can't do that very easily in New York, previewing for three or four weeks, because everybody will come and see it. You'll be on the Internet that night. It's much more difficult now.

SF: It's interesting talking about *Curtains*, which is about a show in trouble playing the Colonial Theatre in Boston. We had our own real life experience with a show called *Seussical*, at the Colonial Theatre in Boston. It was a crazy experience, with directors being replaced, designers being replaced, and scenery that one night would be on stage, and the next night would be in the alley. It was surreal. Though, in terms of the writing, we had changed far less than we did with *Ragtime*. There's something about the advent of the Internet, where every dot and dash can now be documented globally. It was so crazy. For example, there would be a posting that would appear on the net after a performance saying, "The star and his wife had a fight, in his dressing room at intermission." Everything was up for public consumption. We couldn't figure out who the mole was.

In the Colonial every creative meeting is held in the ladies' lounge, which is this very beautiful room with a large ornate table. It got so crazy that, before we would start, we would send the assistant into the ladies' room to look under the stalls, to see if there were feet there. Is there somebody listening? I think it just gets harder and harder to do the work that you describe, the necessary work of developing and shaping a show, being under such public scrutiny.

I have a question in terms of the writing process. You were talking about your fingers having their own life, whenever you're imagining a song at the keyboard. You work with such extraordinary performers, especially the ladies in your shows. I wonder if sometimes, when you're writing a song, you imagine Chita singing this number, or Liza, or Deb Monk or Karen Ziemba?

JK: When we knew that Lenya was going to be in *Cabaret*, it was easy to put Lenya's voice in the back of my head. You do that sort of naturally. You listen to the exuberance of a Chita or a Liza, in the back of your head. If you write something where you can't hear them singing, you've probably written it wrong. The thing with Chita and Liza is, of course, you could write anything. They gave you a freedom so that you could write in any kind of range.

SF: Just a season ago, Lynn and I were asked to write original songs for *Chita Rivera, The Dancer's Life*. One of the assignments that we were given was to create a new song, a musical fabric that would through several of Chita's greatest hits. The concept the director and writer had come up with was the relationship of the actress to her characters, what she thought about this character, the relationship of performer to character. For us, it was about writing this incredibly elaborate wraparound number, around pre-existing songs. Then I realized what the moments were: they were four show stopping moments from John's shows that Chita had starred in. It was the most daunting thing I believe I have ever been asked to do in my career.

JK: I remember hearing that, and I thought how difficult the assignment was, and how marvelously you really achieved it.

SF: It was tricky. But it was great rubbing elbows with you musically, John.

