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The Frog Bride Program Notes

When a frog talks, listen. It's a voice from the wet, murky swamp – half land, half water - where anything can happen.

I first heard The Frog Bride story from poet Robert Bly, then I read several versions of it in collections of Russian fairy tales. In this yarn the qualities of innocence, wonder, loss and discovery are clothed in the characters of princes, frogs, witches, and one very enchanted young lady. Yes, he marries a frog, but that is just the beginning of the adventure. The Frog Bride has everything I love in stories; great characters and settings, a truly troublesome problem, a quest, and the unearthing of wisdom.

Prokofiev's "Five Melodies for Violin and Piano" was chosen for its beauty, its emotional power and complexity, and because the movements are just the right length.

Kandinsky's paintings were selected from the Guggenheim Museum's collection for their sheer lyrical beauty but also to reflect the artist's evolution as one of the founders of abstract art.

Enjoy!

David Gonzalez

The Frog Bride Biographies

Mr. Gonzalez – (*Writer/Performer/Producer*) created and performed *¡Sofrito!* with Larry Harlow and The Latin Legends Band, *Double Crossed; The Saga of the St. Louis*, commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution, with a re-staging at The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and *MytholoJazz*, the Greek myth of Orpheus set to a modern jazz score by D.D. Jackson. He was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant to research, write and perform *Finding North*, to commemorate the opening of National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. *City of Dreams*, a spoken word/Latin jazz production, was commissioned by the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, and developed at La MaMa ETC. He recently completed *We Rise for Freedom*, a libretto commissioned for The Cincinnati Opera that will premiere in 2007. *The Frog Bride* received a 2006 Drama Desk nomination for “Unique Theatrical Experience”.

Mr. Gonzalez’ poetry was featured on Bill Moyers’ documentary *Fooling with Words*, as well as NPR’s *All Things Considered*. For eight seasons he was the host of *New York Kids* on WNYC. David worked for many years as a music therapist in NYC area schools and hospitals, and received his doctorate from New York University’s School of Education in 1992. Online at www.davidgonzalez.com.

Lenard Petit – (*Director*) has directed and choreographed successful productions on and off Broadway. He has been the Director of the Michael Chekhov Acting Studio since 1995, and has worked in theaters all over the world including Munich, Helsinki, Denmark, Amsterdam, Berlin, Zurich, London, Moscow, Madrid, Riga, and Irkutsk, Siberia. Mr. Petit has also worked in New York as an actor for 25 years with such notable directors as Julie Taymor, Richard Forman, Meredith Monk, and Ping Chong. www.michaelchekhovactingstudio.com

Daniel Kelly – (*Composer and Pianist*) has developed his own personal and unique approach to jazz, Afro-Cuban music and free improvisation using keyboards, samplers, and electronic sound manipulation as well as the acoustic piano. He has recorded and/or performed with musicians such as saxophonist Michael Brecker, hip-hop star Lauryn Hill, Harvie S, Bobby Sanabria, William Parker and John Zorn. Daniel has recorded two highly acclaimed CDs, *World* and *Duets with Ghosts*. Visit him at www.danielkellymusic.com.

Christian Howes – (*Violin*) At 33, Christian Howes is widely recognized as one of the world’s most respected young, modern jazz violinists. Having been classically trained and awarded with honors early on, he has since reached across generations, genres, and geographic boundaries, performed around the world under his own name and with greatly varied artists including Les Paul, Bill Evans, Greg Osby, D.D. Jackson, Steve Turre, Dafnis Prieto, and others. Widely sought after as an educator by universities, summer festivals, and schools, Howes has 8 recordings as leader, leads several groups on tour, offers clinics, his own annual fiddle camp, and maintains an active correspondence regarding his activities at www.christianhowes.com

Matyas Kelemen – (*Video Design*) was born 1980 in Transilvania, and grew up surrounded by a community of artists in which his mother was a prominent figure. Educated as a fine artist and cinematographer at Parsons (NYC), he started experimenting with multi-media art and video installations in the Brooklyn underground scene of the 1990’s, as well as co-hosting industrial style raves and gatherings. His work integrates performance and installation art, video with live music and DJs in custom designed future/archaic environments. In 2001 Matyas founded Reality Engine, a multi-media art collective specializing in site-specific Audio-Visual installations. www.realityengine.org

The Frog Bride **Interview with David Gonzalez**

1. What is your artistic background?

My Uncle Jose made me a puppet theater when I was seven and my mother sewed red velvet curtains for it. My first show was a musical (I sang all the roles), about a boy's adventure in Central Park. In High School I graduated from air-guitar to real guitar and music has been at the center of my life ever since. Jazz artists John Coltrane, Elvin Jones, Wes Montgomery, Charles Mingus, and many others, showed me possibilities of musical and artistic achievement I had never before dreamed of. I fell in love with the sound of jazz and began serious study.

From an early age I was drawn to human service work so quickly my creative life moved into the field of Music Therapy where I received Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate degrees. Music Therapy brings the art of musician to the needs of the handicapped – often in creative collaboration; improvisations, songwriting, jam sessions, movement, poetry, and, yes, storytelling. I began working with stories in my sessions with emotionally troubled kids, helping them to create spontaneous operas, and musical myths where they could express themselves within a rich and accepting musical relationship. Those wonderful years of hard work, mostly in special education settings, is the “wind beneath my wings”. Together with my “kids” I lived first-hand the real power of art to touch, inspire and heal – it's no wonder my artistic mission is to join great music and world myths onstage.

One of the greatest pleasures in my life has been the opportunity to collaborate with brilliant musicians such as Larry Harlow, Yomo Toro, DD Jackson, Mark Dresser, Lisa Sokolov, Andrew Cyrille, Daniel Kelly, Christian Howes, Bobby Sanabria, John DiMartino, Marvin Sewell and many others. I never went to theater school and have no formal training – I've learned by watching and doing, always paying very close attention to the audience, observing their responses, making sure that they are journeying with me to the glorious places where myth and music lead us.

2. What inspires you to tell stories?

Stories saved me. There was a time in my life (I was about twenty-two), when I felt *very* confused about the “big picture” – I just couldn't figure out what was important. Lucky for me I was introduced to Joseph Campbell and Robert Johnson, two of the best storytellers and story-thinkers that ever spun a yarn. I read everything they wrote. Suddenly and completely I saw how stories could be a comfort and an inspiration, and how stories join people. This is perhaps the main thing – that we gather together for storytelling, and then the stories, and the storytellers, shower us with their gifts. About this time I attended a storytelling circle around a campfire deep in the Maine woods. The storyteller, Karen Seiber, lit us up with her voice, language and gestures – I remember thinking, “That is what I want to do – to bring people on a journey like that!”

I often choose to tell stories that are at first intriguing and confusing -- tales that perplex me. By working on them, by exploring their situations and uncovering the story's characters, I come to understand the deeper meanings hidden within the tale. This helps me sharpen my insight into myself and enriches my life.

3. What makes a good story?

A difficult situation inhabited by great characters, a bucket-full of colorful details, and a brilliant resolution.

4. What is the inspiration behind *The Frog Bride*?

There is something in Ivon's (the protagonist) dilemma, and the choices that he must make, that I relate to. When I first heard the story I immediately sensed it was like a dream that I could have dreamed. Maybe there is a little bit of Ivon in all of us. Ivon is like a seed that has fallen into the ground -- he cannot see himself, and knows not what he will become. Fortunately the swamp soil is rich and wet, the sun is high, and the adventure has begun -- but things are not what they seem and there is danger ahead. *The Frog Bride* is a magical story about the journey of a lifetime -- how a boy becomes a man.

5. How does Sergi Prokofiev's music support the story?

Sometimes I like to think that the story actually supports the music. Prokofiev's score is so profoundly beautiful that there are times within the show where all else stops and the music carries on functioning to extend the language I am speaking onstage and leading us into a further dimension. These quiet interludes are moments when the music takes hold and reveals itself.

The various movements of *Cinq Melodies pour Violon et Piano* propel the story. Prokofiev's genius for knowing, and making available in gorgeous sound, the full range of human feeling lends *The Frog Bride* emotional depth, honesty and passion. Violinist Christian Howes and pianist Daniel Kelly have incorporated motifs from the Prokofiev into their new compositions on modern electric instruments, giving new sonorities and character to the classical music.

6. Why did you choose the abstract art of Wassily Kandinsky in the piece?

Many years ago I saw a retrospective show of Kandinsky's paintings at Centre Pompidou in Paris. The exhibit began with his early paintings where trees were trees, people were people, and landscapes were landscapes. Gradually, as I moved from painting to painting, and as Kandinsky's work moved toward abstraction, my mind opened to the freedom, beauty and power of modern art. I think I spent five hours there. Since that day I've been a huge fan. I knew that I wasn't going to speak over Prokofiev's music and that I wanted a visual experience to complement it and add to the mood of the story. Kandinsky, a fellow Russian master, with his strangely beautiful and evocative paintings was the obvious choice.

For a long time I have been fascinated by the juxtaposition of music and painting. This "collaboration" of Prokofiev and Kandinsky brings a certain Russian intensity and intelligence to the work, and, since there is no specific spoken narrative along with the paintings, the audience is free to make any associations they wish -- the imaginative journey of the piece becomes more individual, more personal.

7. What was the development process like for you and your artistic team?

I checked the "Frog Bride" folder in my computer and found that the first draft was dated 1994! Over the years I've been refining the script, and, with the generous help of friends and arts institutions, we've gradually been able to bring the story to its final stage. *The Frog Bride* began, as most of my pieces do, with me, a microphone, and an auditorium filled with kids. I told and re-told the tale many times in schools, libraries and community centers. Once I felt good about the text I searched for the music, then I made five short films of five Kandinsky paintings. With these basic elements Christian Howes, Daniel Kelly, Lenard Petit and I traveled up to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) where we stitched the music, video

and story together and played before our first live audience. We received a standing ovation so I knew we were on to something. Last year the Theatre Development Fund (TDF) gave us the opportunity to re-mount the show for an audience of fifth graders and to work on the video element. For the current New Victory Theatre production we've added the talents of video artist Matyas Kelerman. In the true spirit of the piece, Matyas and I actually spent an hour wading hip-deep into a funky swamp to film the perfect settings for the tale to unfold. Lighting designer David Lander came in to see our rehearsals and workshops to get a sense of the relationship between the video and the onstage drama before he created his beautiful lighting design. Recently our director, Lenard Petit, has been researching the theory behind the charm of traditional Japanese Zen rock gardens and has used some of those ideas to gather the varied theatrical elements we are employing into a simple, balanced and graceful whole.

8. Some say theater is ever changing, what is your definition of theater?

Big question... I don't have a definition of theater – maybe someday I will. For now I can say that theater is about the live transmission of passion, inquiry, emotion, sometimes even wisdom, from the performer to the audience member, and that the greater the rapport created onstage the deeper and more fulfilling the experience is.

On the poetic side, there is this... Theater happens when imagination takes wing and lands on the tree of possibility.

And then there is this... "Theater is an illusion that we willingly enter." This quote from Marianna Houston, Education Director at Theater Development Fund (TDF), says a lot about the "contract" that an audience has with the play. In theater we choose to suspend reality with the hope that fantasy will give the real world more vitality and truth.

9. What was your favorite story growing up?

The story of my family's arrival and survival in America – especially the one about the chicken that magically fed seventeen people, (practically Biblical, no?). These stories were always funny and full of love, and the crazy cast of characters would come over for dinner and parties. Other favorites were Robinson Crusoe, The Little Engine that Could, and of course The Cat in the Hat. I also liked The Wizard of Oz, but was absolutely *terrified* of the Wicked Witch of the West and her flying monkeys. Baba Yaga, the Russian witch you will meet in The Frog Bride, isn't that kind of witch – she's more of a wizened wise woman of the forest who fiercely protects her powers.