

# Duncan Sheik

## A SPIRITED DISCOURSE ON *WHISPER HOUSE*

by bill biss

After a very successful turn on Broadway creating the music for a frustrated and anguished environment in *Spring Awakening*, Duncan Sheik now casts his musical spell on the spirit world with his new musical called *Whisper House*. The book for the musical was written by Kyle Jarrow and tells the story of a young boy, Christopher who has lost his father in WWII. His mother is too mentally unstable to care for him; hence he is sent to live with a distant aunt who he has never met. His aunt, Lilly, is a lighthouse keeper and lives with a worker she has employed to help her named Yasujiro. As Christopher explores this new world, he finds himself visited by four ghosts. Is this a child's wild imagination or are these ghosts simply warning him of dangers that lie ahead. Duncan Sheik is extremely thrilled about this new production heading to The Old Globe Theatre on January 13 through February 21. Don't be too frightened though. Read on.



**The Rage Monthly:** You are using your album *Whisper House* as a sounding board for this stage production. Did you go into the songwriting process thinking this will not only be an album but will be adapted to the stage from the very beginning?

Duncan Sheik: Yeah. In fact, what happened was it was initially conceived only as a stage musical. I finished writing the songs...most of them, by February of 2008. So, I started recording them as demos, fancy demos. Then some people at Sony heard those recordings. They got very excited about it and they were like maybe this is the next Duncan Sheik album. The way that the album came out as a proper release was a little bit of a happy accident.

**Rage:** Oh good. It's almost like you're letting the cat out of the bag before the stage musi-

cal even happens, as it's the same music on the album and in the play.

DS: Yes. There were a couple things going on. One of the big issues was actually the fact that we'd been commissioned by a theatre in Connecticut that kind of went out of business. So, we needed to attract attention from some other regional theatres to get the show produced. The record actually became a really great way of cementing people's excitement about the piece.

**Rage:** One of the songs is called "Better To Be Dead." Will you tell me about the songwriting process and research for these songs?

DS: Sure. The idea of working on a piece that dealt with ghosts and a ghost story in a lighthouse kind of appealed to me because I grew up in Hilton Head, South

Carolina. Telling ghost stories and ghost lore was a big part of growing up in South Carolina. Being there kind of triggered a pre-adolescent, spooky style of being that I used to experience as a kid. So, right away there was an internal connection to the setting and the mood of the piece. Actually, Kyle, Keith Powell and I went down to Charleston in January of 2008 to do a writing retreat. While we were there we went on one of those... it's kind of cheesy but they do a ghost tour of Charleston and tell all these ghost stories. We immersed ourselves in that kind of narrative style. That really informed the tone of the songs.

The funny thing about ghost stories is that they're meant to be scary but there's also an aspect of them that is kind of whimsical. They almost have a sense of humor. I tried to really play that up in the song lyrics. When the ghosts are singing, "It's better to be dead," it's their sardonic way of looking down at the paths of these sad human beings who are living their kind of pathetic little lives. The ghosts have kind of been there and done that and quote, unquote, risen above it all. At least, that's what they tell themselves.

**Rage: Your last collaboration on *Spring Awakening* working with Steven Sater was so successful. How does this collaboration feel for you working with Kyle Jarrow?**

DS: Kyle is a very different kind of writer than Steven, which is fine. Steven is very immersed in poetry and the Greek classics, somewhat more obscure kinds of things that are important pieces of literature but a bit on the fringe. Whereas Kyle is a little bit more populist in a certain way, in terms of his writing style. The big difference in this collaboration is really that I wrote the lyrics, and then Kyle and I made some adjustments here and there. The story is really Kyle's and the songs are mainly mine. What was so fun about that, for me, is obviously I had written lyrics for my own records in the past, but I had spent the past three or four years mainly working on theatre stuff with Steven. So, I hadn't really written any lyrics at all. It was so great. I had three years of pent-up subconscious material that was waiting to come out. I won't say it was easy to write these songs but they just came very naturally and that was a lot of fun.

**Rage: Please tell me about the cast of *Whisper House*.**

DS: The great actress, Mare Winningham is playing Lilly. We're really excited to have her on board. A young boy named Eric Brent Zutty plays Christopher. The director and Kyle auditioned him and they are "over the moon" about him. I haven't met him yet but I trust their judgment in these matters. Then, we have a great Filipino actor, Arthur Acuna, who is playing Yasuhiro who's the Japanese fellow who works at the lighthouse. Most importantly, for me, we have Holly Brook playing a female ghost. I'm very thrilled about that. I'm also thrilled that my good friend, David Poe is

singing the male lead ghost who I sing on the record. We've been working together for ten years. He really understands my sensibility. He's a great singer. He's just kind of a raffish character. I'm really excited to get him on stage and see what he does.

**Rage: Now, it's just the ghosts who sing all the songs?**

DS: Yes. There are songs that happen in between the scenes. Our challenge from the very beginning was how do you integrate the actors into the songs in some way? And how do you integrate the ghosts into the scenes in some way to make this whole thing work? It's a little bit of a very different conceit for a piece of musical theatre. I think we've had some really good solutions to that issue. This is the first time that we are properly staging the piece.

**Rage: It sounds very avant-garde to me.**

DS: (laughter) There's an aspect of it that is avant-garde in terms of the structure and the set-up but in fact, the music and the story itself are not avant-garde at all. I think the story is engaging and quite moving and also, quite funny.

**Rage: Thank you. I'm looking forward to seeing the show.**

DS: Great, great. I can't wait.



Mare Winningham will portray "Lilly" in *Whisper House*.

