



Finn, William (b. 1952)

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Playwright and composer William Finn explored the nature of the chosen family with wit and sensitivity, humor and drama in his Tony Award-winning musical *The Falsettos*. Juxtaposing contradictory emotions is typical of his work.

William Alan Finn is the oldest of three children in a family of Russian Jewish descent. Born in Boston on February 28, 1952, he grew up in nearby Natick.

He began composing after receiving a guitar as a bar mitzvah present and subsequently taught himself to play the piano but did not immediately envision music as his career. Following his graduation from Natick High School he enrolled at Williams College, where he majored in literature and American civilization.

Finn's interest in music remained lively, however. He participated in musicals at Williams and even penned three of his own. He was awarded the college's Hutchinson Fellowship for Musical Composition, an honor that fellow alumnus Stephen Sondheim had also earned.

After graduating from Williams, Finn spent a year studying music at the University of California at Berkeley, then moved to New York in 1976 to pursue a career in musical theater.

By 1978 Finn had written the book and the songs for *In Trousers*, which was produced off-Broadway early the following year, with Finn directing. Richard Eder, then the drama critic for the *New York Times*, wrote a scathing review of the show, which closed quickly. Dispirited, Finn briefly considered giving up music as a vocation and going to medical school.

Fortunately he abandoned neither music nor Marvin, the central character from *In Trousers*, who reappeared in *March of the Falsettos* in 1980. Frank Rich, who had succeeded Eder at the *New York Times*, gave the show an enthusiastic review, noting that after hearing only a few bars of Finn's music "one feels the unmistakable, revivifying charge of pure talent."

In a 1993 interview Finn explained the musical allusion in the play's title by saying that the falsetto is a voice outside the normal range and that he "was writing about people outside the normal range of people [he] grew up with in Massachusetts."

March of the Falsettos finds Marvin trying to maintain a close-knit family even though he has just left his wife, Trina, and son, Jason, for a male lover, Whizzer, whereupon Trina begins dating his psychiatrist, Mendel. Critic Rich noted that "the show's hetero- and homosexual couples both suffer from the same anxieties, loneliness, and neuroses" and that the most touching relationship is Marvin's with Jason, whose affection he is afraid of losing.

After *March of the Falsettos* Finn had a fallow musical period during which he wrote articles for airline magazines and also contributed to better-known publications such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Finn's return to musical theater was inauspicious; his *Romance in Hard Times* closed after a short run in 1989. The following year, however, he had a hit with *Falsettoland*.

Finn has stated that *Falsettoland* had its genesis at a family Thanksgiving dinner. His family has always been "enormously supportive" of him and has fully accepted Arthur Salvatore, his partner since 1980, as part of the clan. At the fateful Thanksgiving meal Salvatore was helping Finn's little nephew cut his meat when the boy suddenly jumped up in his chair and exclaimed, "I love Uncle Arthur!" This led Finn back to considering the meaning of family and the fate of Marvin.

In *Falsettoland* Trina has married Mendel, and Whizzer, who left Marvin at the end of *March*, returns to him, and the two set up housekeeping next-door to a lesbian couple. Whizzer, however, has contracted AIDS, still a nameless disease in the 1981 setting of the piece. Marvin's family--and it is a family--deals simultaneously with the joy of Jason's upcoming bar mitzvah and the pain of Whizzer's inevitable death.

Finn turned the two latter parts of the Marvin story into a single show, called *The Falsettos*, in 1992. The combination was exceptionally powerful; Joe Brown of the *Washington Post* wrote that "the audience, which began the play roaring with laughter, is left in tear-soaked shreds."

The Falsettos was richly honored at the Tony Awards, winning for Best Original Score and Best Musical.

At the moment of triumph when he accepted the statuettes, however, Finn was desperately ill. Suffering a loss of vision and balance and even passing out as he tried to walk, Finn was first diagnosed with a brain tumor, but it was later determined that he had an arteriovenous malformation, a congenital condition.

Conventional surgery being out of the question, Finn underwent radiation Gamma Knife surgery at the University of Virginia hospital, his family--conventional and unconventional--at his side.

Finn used the experience to create his next and most autobiographical work, *A New Brain* (1998). He managed to create a life-affirming, humor-infused show despite the backdrop of a potentially fatal medical crisis.

The same year saw the premiere of *Love's Fire*, a compilation of work by seven writers--Tony Kushner, Marsha Norman, Ntozake Shange, Eric Bogosian, John Guare, Wendy Wasserstein, and Finn--each of whom wrote a segment interpreting one of Shakespeare's sonnets. Finn's piece, *Painting You*, based on Sonnet 102, which is almost entirely sung, takes a light-hearted look at a gay artist having trouble capturing his lover on canvas. Perhaps because of its unusual structure, the play has received mixed reviews, ranging from delighted to bewildered.

Finn's most recent venture is *Elegies* (2003), a musical remembrance of loved ones, colleagues, and pets who have died over the past twenty years. Once again Finn takes painful topics, including the loss of his beloved mother and the devastating toll of AIDS among his friends, and creates a celebration of life that critic Stephen Holden calls a "moving and exuberant song suite."

Throughout his career Finn has been compared to Sondheim because of the wit and urbanity of his writing. He has his own distinctive voice, however, and speaks with understanding about confronting life in all its complexity with sadness and joy, dilemmas and hope intermingled.

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