



Gordon, Ricky Ian (b. 1956)

by Greg Varner

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Of the handful of young theatrical composers often designated as heirs to the musical legacy of Stephen Sondheim (who revolutionized musical theater with complex, groundbreaking musicals such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures*, and *Into the Woods*), one of the most talented is Ricky Ian Gordon. Gordon has been praised for the lyrical quality of his music and for bridging the worlds of theater and art song.

Born on May 15, 1956, Gordon grew up on Long Island. His father, Sam, was an electrician. His mother, Eve, a former singer, gave him the name Ricky Ian because she thought it had a nice ring and would look good on a marquee. Gordon's family history was documented in *Home Fires*, a book by Donald Katz.

Gordon grew up in awe of his three sisters; one of them, Susan Gordon Lydon, became a founding editor of *Rolling Stone*. Susan would tuck Ricky into bed at night by reading poems aloud, sparking his lifelong love of poetry. Gordon has set many poems to music, including works by Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, and Jean Valentine, among others. He set several poems from *What the Living Do*, Marie Howe's moving collection detailing her brother's death from AIDS.

In a pattern typical of adolescents who turn out to be gay, Gordon grew up conscious of being different from other children and was victimized by neighborhood bullies. The arts were an important consolation for him. He was particularly drawn to the poetry of Harlem Renaissance poet Hughes, perhaps because of its expression of Hughes's outsider status and the cultural criticism it embodies. In 1995, Gordon created *Only Heaven*, a stage work that presents 29 songs set to poems by Hughes.

Proximity to Manhattan offered Gordon the advantage of visits to Lincoln Center, where he nourished his fascination with opera. The word "opera," Gordon later remembered, held for him the same excitement as the word "penis." His favorite operas included Alban Berg's *Lulu* and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, though popular music by the likes of Joni Mitchell also caught his ear.

A watershed moment occurred in 1975 when Gordon heard Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems in settings by composer Ned Rorem. "Her poems leapt out from the page for me," Gordon recalled. "Suddenly, I understood [them] as I never had before."

At this point, Gordon had already begun writing songs. He entered Carnegie Mellon University intending to major in piano, but soon switched to composing instead.

Speaking of his motive for composing, Gordon has compared himself to the late Robert Lowell, who said he wrote poetry "to break people's hearts."

The AIDS-related death in 1996 of Gordon's lover, Jeffrey Grossi, inspired Gordon to write the songs that eventually found their home in *Dream True* (1998), a musical in which the love between two men takes on a mythic aspect.

Gordon's other works include *Stonewall/Night Variations* (1994), a musical commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion. The site-specific work was performed on a vacant Hudson River pier in New York.

Among Gordon's operatic credits include *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1996), an opera with a libretto by Jean Claude Van Itallie; *Autumn Valentine* (1992), a two-character operetta based on the works of Dorothy Parker; and *Night Flight to San Francisco* (2000), an operatic monologue from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

Gordon's work is available on several recordings. Audra McDonald, the sensational young theatrical diva, recorded several of his songs for her debut CD, *Way Back to Paradise* (1998). McDonald also appears on *Bright Eyed Joy* (2001), an impressive collection devoted to Gordon's songs, which features as well Dawn Upshaw, Adam Guettel, Theresa McCarthy, and other performers.

The original cast recording of Gordon's score for *My Life with Albertine*, a musical based on the work of Marcel Proust, is also available. This show, with book by Richard Nelson, who also collaborated on the lyrics with Gordon, was produced off-Broadway in 2003 with Brent Carver and Emily Skinner in its cast.

Soprano Harolyn Blackwell recorded "Genius Child," a song cycle including several of Gordon's settings of poems by Hughes, for her album *Strange Hurt* (1994).

Gordon's work has also been performed by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, and soprano Renée Fleming has added his setting of Emily Dickinson's "Will There Really Be a Morning?" to her repertoire.

With many future projects and recordings underway, Gordon's work should soon become even more widely known.

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About the Author

Greg Varner was arts editor of the *Washington Blade* from October, 1997 until September, 2001. He earned an undergraduate degree in writing at Oberlin College, and a master's degree at University of Virginia. He lives in Washington, D.C.