

INTERVIEW
Stephin Merritt



Rob Hamm

By Matthew Love May 12, 2009

Stephin Merritt made his name writing tight, pithy pop songs under various mood-reflecting monikers—including The Magnetic Fields, whose triple-disc album *69 Love Songs* remains a landmark achievement in pop music. He's also spent time writing soundtracks, including a song cycle for Lemony Snicket's *Series Of Unfortunate Events*. And over the past several years, Merritt has revealed a serious crush on the theater, writing scores for three pieces in collaboration with opera director Chen Shi-Zheng. Merritt's newest theatrical project is a musical adaptation of Neil Gaiman's book *Coraline*, with a script written by David Greenspan—who also stars as The Other Mother alongside mature actor Jayne Houdyshell as 9-year-old Coraline. (This is the same *Coraline* that was adapted into an animated movie earlier this year.) Before the show started previews on May 8, Merritt talked to *Decider* about his mania for Neil Gaiman, John Cage, the importance of scaring kids, and what a rat's accent sounds like. And yes, he did it all with a wry chuckle.

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Decider: Were you an actor when you were young?

Stephen Merritt: No. Well, in high school?

D: That counts.

SM: In the same sense, I was a bowler. And a mathematician. And a chemist.

D: Fair enough. You've been interested in this particular story for a while, no?

SM: Yeah, I've been in on *Coraline* from the beginning. I read it in manuscript, because Neil [Gaiman] had asked me to do the music for the audio book.

D: It seems like the story of *Coraline* shares a good number of your sensibilities. Did you feel a kinship with it?

SM: I've read everything Neil Gaiman has ever written. He writes mythic books that are self-critiquing, self-referential, and funny. Who wouldn't identify with that? So, yeah, of course I identify with *Coraline*. She's quite a blank character into which you can project anything you want. My personal identification with the book, however, is backward. I'm a child of weird hippies who only occasionally had glimpses of normalcy in other peoples' kitchens. We often didn't have a kitchen. So I look at *Coraline* the way I look at *The Brady Bunch*—as a mysterious place that's kind of my life turned inside out.

D: Was the idea of casting David Greenspan, a man, as The Other Mother present at the start of the new production?

SM: No, in fact, we both thought it was kind of a bad idea to have a man play that part. We only discovered in reading scripts to each other again and again that David was the perfect person for *The Other Mother*.

D: Casting the very adult Jayne Houdyshell as the 9-year-old Coraline is also a very bold choice.

SM: Her 9-year-old girl is not remotely convincing, of course, on one level. She doesn't look like a 9-year-old girl and she doesn't sound like a 9-year-old girl. But you completely forget that she isn't a 9-year-old girl after watching for a little while. It's so odd. And then when she stops acting, you have to suddenly wake up and remember that she is, in fact, your pal Jayne. And that she has an American accent.

D: So everyone is doing British accents?

SM: British or Hungarian or rat.

D: There's a rat accent?

SM: There is a rat accent. There's actually three little rat songs, which I sang for the audio book. It sounds like this: [singing] "We are small but we are many / we are many, we are small / we were here before you rose / we will be here when you fall."

D: It sounds like a combination of serious nasal resonance and throat singing.

SM: Yes, and when I can get the actors to do it correctly, they're inhaling.

D: In terms of the writing process, is it different to work inside somebody else's story rather than imagining your own?

SM: If I were writing this for a pop record, I would be able to change *Coraline*'s character at my whim. Instead, I am stuck with—and endowed with—a complete story whose audience is not going to put up with major changes. Though we have added things. The dogs do nasty deeds they don't do in the book that are entirely my invention. So I think we might have a shocked author on our hands.

D: Have you spoken with Neil Gaiman much, asking for advice or discussing story points?

SM: We had an extended difficulty with the color coding of the marbles that represent the souls of the dead children.

D: How does it feel to have the movie adaptation come out not so long ago and be received so well?

SM: It was independently exciting for me because I'm a 3-D movie fan. I thought *Coraline* in 3-D was a great idea. I think it's probably my favorite 3-D movie of all time—and I've seen a lot of them. But it was hard for me to watch the movie without critiquing it. So I was not able to enjoy the movie—but I think it's a great movie and I look forward to being able to enjoy it.

D: Does writing songs for a musical like this give you a different perspective on the writers who seem to have influenced you the most, like Cole Porter or Irving Berlin?

SM: The primary influence on *Coraline* is John Cage, and I can't say that there's been any show-business-style influence from anyone on this particular show. We're using the prepared piano [ed. note: a Cage staple whose sound is altered by objects like playing cards or aluminum foil placed between the strings or on the hammers of a piano] for most of the show, and we started out with preparations from two Cage pieces. He did work for toy piano and prepared piano, and he is the premier composer of the 20th century on both of those instruments and arguably in general. So we've been heavily influenced—but only by John Cage.

D: There weren't any musicals when you were writing it that you thought should have an active influence on what you were doing?

SM: No. I went to go see *Guys And Dolls* a few weeks ago. I love the songs in *Guys And Dolls*, and I love the book. It's a great musical, one of the best. But at intermission I was thinking, "Wow, this has nothing to do with my life."

D: Was it difficult to expand the sound of the toy piano, which seems like a limited instrument, into an entire musical?

SM: Well, I don't think I'd want to do an entire musical on just the toy piano—unless it was a musical about claustrophobia or something. A one-person solo show: *Schroeder!*

D: How did you come to imagine these instruments as the center of the piece?

SM: Within 10 minutes of thinking *Coraline* should be a musical, I had the instrumentation in mind, because the piano is a symbol of domesticity, the prepared piano is a symbol of the attack on domesticity, and the toy piano is a symbol of childhood. So I think it was, as they say, a no-brainer.

D: Both the Lemony Snicket project and this share a similar Brothers Grimm sort of approach to children's stories. What's fun about being wicked to kids?

SM: I like terrible things happening to children. Who doesn't?

D: Cautious parents?

SM: Well, if you really want your child to have an active imagination, there's nothing quite like H.P. Lovecraft to get your child's nightmares going.

D: So it's nightmare fuel? Healthy nightmare fuel?

SM: Healthy, very healthy.

D: Does this show have the size and scale to move to Broadway? Is that something you aspire to?

SM: Our show is not amplified. I wouldn't want it to go to a larger house without changing. And I actually don't think we'd ever want it to go to a really large theater, so it would have to be pretty intimate even if it was going to be amplified. I think if we were to go to Broadway we'd want to go someplace like the Music Box. Not Studio 54. This is not an epic.