

BENNY & JOON

Book by KIRSTEN GUENTHER
Music by NOLAN GASSER
Lyrics by MINDI DICKSTEIN,
Choreographed by SCOTT RINK
Directed by JACK CUMMINGS III









CREATIVE TEAM



KIRSTEN GUENTHER (*Book*) is the recipient of a Richard Rodgers Award, Rockefeller Grant, Dramatists Guild Fellowship, and a Lincoln Center Honorarium. Current projects include Universal's *Heart and Souls, Measure of Success* (Amanda Lipitz Productions), *Mrs. Sharp* (Richard Rodgers Award workshop; Playwrights Horizons, starring Jane Krakowski, dir. Michael Greif), and writing a new book to Paramount's *Roman Holiday*. She wrote the book and lyrics for *Little Miss Fix-it* (as seen on NBC), among others. Previously, Kirsten lived in Paris, where she worked as a Paris correspondent

(usatoday.com). MFA, NYU Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program. ASCAP and Dramatists Guild. For my brother, Travis.



NOLAN GASSER (*Music*) is a critically acclaimed composer, pianist, and musicologist—notably, the architect of Pandora Radio's Music Genome Project. He holds a PhD in Musicology from Stanford University. His original compositions have been performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, among others. Theatrical projects include the musicals *Benny & Joon* and *Start Me Up* and the opera *The Secret Garden*. His book, *Why You Like It: The Science and Culture of Musical Taste* (Macmillan), will be released on April 30, 2019, followed by his rock/world CD *Border Crossing* in June 2019. His TEDx Talk,

"Empowering Your Musical Taste," is available on YouTube.



MINDI DICKSTEIN (*Lyrics*) wrote the lyrics for the Broadway musical *Little Women* (MTI; Ghostlight/Sh-k-boom). *Benny & Joon*, based on the MGM film, was a NAMT selection (2016) and had its world premiere at The Old Globe (2017). Mindi's work has been commissioned, produced, and developed widely, including by Disney (*Toy Story: The Musical*), Second Stage (*Snow in August*), Playwrights Horizons (Steinberg Commission), ASCAP Workshop, and Lincoln Center ("Hear and Now: Contemporary Lyricists"). Honors include a Larson Foundation Award and a Constance Klinsky Award from Second Stage. MFA and

current faculty, NYU Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program. Dramatists Guild and ASCAP. Twitter: @mindidickstein



JACK CUMMINGS III (*Director*) is the artistic director of Transport Group, where his select credits include *Summer and Smoke* (coproduction with Classic Stage Company), *Renascence* (codirected with Dick Scanlan), *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, Queen of the Mist, The Audience, Strange Interlude, I Remember Mama, Normal, Once Upon a Mattress, Picnic, The Boys in the Band, and Our Town.* Other NY credits: Terrence McNally's *And Away We Go, A Thousand Words Come to Mind, Arlington.* Regional credits: *Benny & Joon* (Old Globe), *I Remember Mama* (Two River). BA, The College

of William & Mary; MFA, University of Virginia. He is married to Barbara Walsh.

"Benny and Joon, Benny and Joon, go together like a bowl and a spoon. Benny and Joon. Juniper and Benjamin. Who's singing slightly out of tune.

There is always you and me. Always me and you."

~ Lyrics from BENNY & JOON ~

BENNY AND JOON – BEHIND THE MOVIE AND THE MUSICAL



Benny and Joon was a film written by Barry Berman and Lesley McNeill and directed by Jeremiah Chechik. It was filmed in Spokane, Washington in 1992 and released one year later by MGM. The movie starred Johnny Depp, Mary Stuart Masterson and Aidan Quinn. The box office for the movie grossed (with inflation) the equivalent of over \$40 million today and is considered a sleeper hit. Over the years it has grown a cult following from audiences of all ages. Following its debut, it was praised by audiences and critics alike for being a romantic comedy that featured mental illness and grief as key elements of the story.



The film is also well known for its use of physical comedy,

which was based on legendary silent film stars like Buster Keaton (see picture on left) and Charlie Chaplin (see picture on right). It also is known for its use of the song "I'm Gonna"

Be (500 Miles)" by The Proclaimers. The song was recorded in the 1980s but when it was used in the movie, the song climbed all the way up to #3 on the Billboard Hot 100 list in 1993.



The idea for the musical came from composer Nolan Gasser, who was in discussions with MGM about adapting one of their films

as a stage musical. After watching over 25 of their films, 15 minutes into Benny & Joon he realized he found the right film to adapt. In an interview, he mentioned that the movie "had a set of vibrant and quirky characters, compelling romance, clever humor, and archetypal trials of self-discovery." Along with lyricist Mindi Dickstein and book writer Kirsten Guenther, they started the development process with readings in 2013 and 2014. They were followed by labs hosted by the Transport Group, Running Deer Musical Theatre Lab, TheatreWorks Silicon Valley Writer's Retreat, and the National Alliance of Musical Theatre Festival.

The developmental work led to its world premiere production at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego from September 7-October 22, 2017. This production was directed by Jack Cummings III and starred Bryce Pinkham and Hannah Elless. The Paper Mill production features the same direction and stars, with the addition of Claybourne Elder as Benny (Hannah Elless as Joon and Claybourne Elder as Benny).



STAGE ADAPTATIONS OF FILMS FROM THE LATE 1980S/EARLY 1990S

Adapting films into stage musicals has become a normal trend over the last 25 years of Broadway's history. This was especially led by Disney, who saw Broadway as an opportunity to see their animated movie musicals come to life.

Within this genre, one period of films that continues to be adapted as Broadway musicals are films from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Disney led the charge with stage adaptations like *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*. From Tony Winners like *Hairspray* to the most recent adaptation to premiere on Broadway, *Pretty Woman*, each of these musicals film sources were released during the same cultural moment as Benny and Joon.









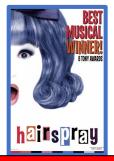
Beauty & the Beast

The Lion King

Newsies

Aladdin







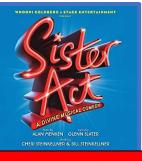


Big the Musical

Hairspray

Heathers

Beetlejuice









Sister Act

Ghost the Musical

The Bodyguard

Pretty Woman

The cast of BENNY & JOON in rehearsal.



BENNY AND JOON – PHYSICAL COMEDY INSPIRATIONS

One of the most memorable aspects of the film *Benny and Joon* was its use of physical comedy in the storytelling. Two legends in this field were silent film stars Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, who have a massive impact on these characters. One of the first moments of the musical we see Sam dressed like Buster Keaton, reading a biography about the comedy legend.

Buster Keaton

Born with the name Joseph Frank Keaton IV, Buster Keaton was born on October 4, 1895 in Piqua, Kansas into a family of vaudeville performers. The story behind his nickname is that when he was 18 months old, he fell down the stairs and was picked up by magician



Harry Houdini, who told his parents "that was a real buster!" Keaton was added to his family's show at the age of 3, starting young with performing acrobatic stunts. It was during this time where he learned that the more serious he became in the act, the bigger the laughs he received. This informed the deadpan expression that made him famous around the world.

After leaving the family act at the age of 21, he ended up with small parts in silent films and became enamored with the form. When he returned home after World War 1, he dove head first into directing and eventually writing and starring in silent films.

He would go on to be one of the most important innovators in the burgeoning field. Films like *The General, One Week, Sherlock, Jr., Cops, The Playhouse* and many more are still regarded today as masterpieces. A staple of all of his films was his trademark character, with facial expressions and slapstick timing that was extremely unique and, in many ways, set the standard for comedians for generations.

With the introduction of "talkies", movies that had sound, Keaton's company was bought by MGM and his career and life was never the same. After a few failures, he left public life for many years, until making a comeback later in life in various television and film roles. In 1959, he received a special Academy Award for his lifetime of work. He passed away in 1966 and to this day is regarded as one of the most important contributors in the history of film and comedy.

Charlie Chaplin

Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in London in 1989 to a poor family. He grew up around show business with her mother performing in vaudeville and always knew that he wanted to be an actor. He eventually toured with a vaudeville troupe that made its way to America, where he caught the eye of film producer Mack Sennett.

Chaplin soon created his signature character, "The Little Tramp", for the film *Kid Auto Races in Venice*. Out of an improvisation, the tramp, with his too small coat, comically

large pants, floppy shoes and derby hat came to life. His first year in movies he made 35 films and in just a few years he became an internationally known movie star. Some of his most famous films include *The Kid, The Gold Rush, The Circus, Easy Street, City Lights, The Vagabond* and *The Great Dictator*.



He was an extremely demanding artist,

who required numerous takes, new sets if he didn't like something and constantly changed costars. This was echoed in her personal life, as he had a few wives and children with multiple women. He eventually left the United States and worked sporadically on passion projects. He did come back to the US in 1972 to receive an honorary Academy Award. He died in Switzerland in 1977. Charlie Chaplin is widely considered as one of the greatest comic artists ever and one of the most important figures in movie history.

BENNY AND JOON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After you see the show and read this study guide, use these prompts to start a discussion with your students and peers.

- 1) Benny & Joon is both a movie and a musical. If you've seen both versions, how do they compare? What is different in the musical?
- 2) Discuss how Joon's disability affects those around her. How does Benny treat her? How does Sam treat her? How do their approaches differ?
- 3) Can you name other movies or musicals that feature people with disabilities?
- 4) Choose a character from the musical that you think is the protagonist. Why are they a hero? Do they have flaws? How do they overcome conflict?
- 5) Benny and Joon lost their parents at a young age. Discuss how this loss affects their lives.

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