

# BWW Interview: Multi-Hat-Wearing Storyteller Tony Spinosa's Bringing A SINGING REVOLUTION

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by Gil Kaan

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The go-to director for many benefit one-nighters, **Tony Spinosa** will world premiere his own *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL* January 15, 2022 on the Broadwater Theatre Main Stage. Tony directs a cast of twenty triple-threat performers backed by a five-piece band as they perform his score and his lyrics (co-written by James Bearhart). Got to delve into the origins of *SINGING REVOLUTION*, as well as what has made Tony a much in-demand director/producer for hot-ticketed benefit shows for BC/EFA, TDF and The Actors Fund.

**Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Tony!**

**When did you first become aware of the true account of Estonia's 1991 revolution against the Soviet Union through song?**

I first learned about Estonia's *SINGING REVOLUTION* while I was on a cruise in the Baltic region of Europe. Our ship was scheduled to stop in St. Petersburg. However, due to some political unrest in Russia, we were redirected to Tallinn, Estonia. This was my first visit to this charming country. As our tour guide led us through Old Town Tallinn, she emphasized the importance of music and singing in Estonian culture. Our final destination in Tallinn was the Song Festival Grounds where Estonians gather for large musical events. This is where our guide began to talk about the *SINGING REVOLUTION* that took place from 1987 to 1991 and the series of events that led Estonia to re-independence from the Soviet Union. I became fascinated with the idea that a country could use the power of song to successfully gain its freedom. This is when it struck me that this was the perfect subject matter for a musical.

**What aspects of this event spoke to you to write *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL*?**

There were several events that inspired the musical. It began with the First Spontaneous Night Song Festival, where 300,000 Estonians gathered at the Song Festival Grounds for three days to sing together in peaceful protest against the Soviet occupation. There was also the Baltic Chain, which was a human chain of two million people that stretched from Tallinn, Estonia, to Riga, Latvia, to Vilnius, Lithuania... a 400-mile chain of people singing for their freedom. The attack on Toompea Castle, where Estonians flooded the streets of Tallinn and surrounded their government building until the Soviet attackers retreated. The video footage of this event looks like a powder keg waiting to explode; however the Estonians maintained their peaceful behavior and sang until the Soviets left the government building. And, finally, the standoff at the Tallinn TV tower, where the Soviets were attempting to cut off all communication between Estonia and the rest of the world by destroying their radio communication.



Once again, the Estonians banded together to keep the Soviet soldiers at bay until they retreated. The power of peaceful protest in all of these events became the backbone of this musical.

**The show spans four decades. How many decades have you spent to get *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL* to its current form today?**

The inspiration for this musical came to me in July of 2014. The show has gone through many incarnations over the years. However, the book for the show really started to take shape when James Bearhart joined the team in October of 2017, and we turned these historical events into a character-driven love story.

**What factors came into play in choosing Los Angeles as the city for your world premiere?**

I have always had a special place in my heart for Los Angeles theatre. In reviewing my options for the world premiere of *SINGING REVOLUTION*, the 99-seat plan in L.A. seemed to be the most affordable contract to mount such a large musical. Los Angeles is also in close proximity to many of the theatres on the West Coast that develop new musicals. This will give them the first glimpse in to a fully realized production of this new musical.

**What cosmic forces brought you together with NewYorkRep?**

We were looking for a fiscal sponsor for the Los Angeles production, and Leelo Linask from the Estonian American National Council referred me to Gayle Waxenberg of NewYorkRep. Gayle reviewed the materials for *SINGING REVOLUTION* and was immediately drawn to the messaging and the themes of this play. It was a perfect match to bring on NewYorkRep as part of our team.

**How did Dreamtone Productions come to world premiere *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL*?**

Dreamtone Productions is the company that was formed to produce *SINGING REVOLUTION* through the development stages of the project. They have been instrumental in producing many of the readings and marketing materials that have propelled us towards the L.A. production.

**You had originally planned to world premiere *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL* February 2021. Were you able to continue to work on this world premiere during lockdown via Zoom? Or did you plan to take an indefinite break?**



When the pandemic hit in March of 2020, we were already in the process of booking the theatre for the L.A. premiere. The show was already in very good shape. During the lockdown, James and I continued to refine the script. We also used our time creating promotional videos and participating in many interviews in an effort to keep the awareness of *SINGING REVOLUTION* alive.

**Are there any cast holdovers in the world premiere from the previous *SINGING REVOLUTION* incarnations?**

The World Premiere of *SINGING REVOLUTION* has been cast with only Los Angeles talent. We are very lucky to have some of the best musical theatre talent in L.A.

**Aside from your co-writer James Bearhart, had you worked with any of your twenty performers, five musicians or technical crew before?**

I had not been part of the L.A. theatre scene since 2007, so many of the connections that I had were no longer available in LA. Thanks to Racquel Lehrman of Theatre Planners, we were able to find a top-notch cast and crew. I am honored by the team that we have assembled.

**You've presented previews/workshops of *SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Estonia 100 Year Celebration in New York City, and the Estonian American National Counsel in Washington, DC. How has the show changed since those presentations?**

The presentations that we have given over the years were primarily showcases of the music. Each time the songs were presented with the talents of Neil Haskell, Uku Suviste (Estonian Eurovision contestant), Erik J. Christensen, or Kristi Roosmaa, the songs took on new life and new meaning for James and I to embellish on. It is always a gift to work with such talented performers.

**You were mentored by the great Michael Bennett. What advice or lessons did Michael Bennett pass on to you that you try to use to this day?**

Study your craft! Michael was a firm believer that it was not just luck that propelled a career. One must train like an athlete to be ready when your window of opportunity appears. He also instilled in me perseverance. He would always say that a creative person in the arts will receive hundreds of "no's" in their career, but it only takes one "yes" to propel you to the next level. Don't pay attention to the "no's."

**What do you remember of the first time you stepped onto the Marquis Theatre stage for your Broadway debut in *PETER PAN* with Cathy Rigby in 1998?**





A Broadway debut is a pinnacle milestone of a performer's career. We had been on tour with **PETER PAN** for about a year before we landed on Broadway. The show was in top form. The most memorable moment for me was the reception that we received at our Gypsy run of the show the night before our first preview. The cheers and support from the NY theatre community was an experience that I will never forget.

**Your website lists you as "producer, stage director, choreographer, writer, arts leader and performer." If you had to choose only one profession to continue, which would it be?**

A storyteller who inspires and transcends audiences through the magic of live theatre.

**As a youth, what did you want to be when you grew up?**

Theatre has always been a part of my life. I had been putting on shows in my backyard in Long Island since the age of five. I recall my kindergarten teacher telling my parents that I was destined to be a performer.

**Having produced numerous events for Broadway Cares, Theatre Development Fund and The Actors Fund, which only allow abbreviated rehearsal times, have you developed a streamlined rehearsal process that you carry over to the full-length musicals you direct and choreograph?**

The experiences that I have had with BC/EFA, TDF and The Actors Fund have definitely helped me to streamline the process in getting a show up. I find that in every level of theatre, it has also become more common that we scale down rehearsal time in order to stay within budget.

**What else is in the near future for Tony Spinosa? More *IN CONCERT* productions?**

I am very lucky to have had the experience to produce many one night only events for The Actors Fund. There is a very special energy when you get to assemble original casts for a reunion concert... **THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE**, **TITLE OF SHOW**, **THEY'RE PLAYING OUR SONG**, and the very special **BOMBSHELL IN CONCERT** (with the cast of **SMASH**) will always hold a special place in my heart. It is hard to predict what will be in my future. I have always believed that a career in theatre can take you down many paths. The joy comes from relishing the journey.

**Thank you again, Tony! I look forward to experiencing your *SINGING REVOLUTION*.**

For tickets for the live performances of **SINGING REVOLUTION: THE MUSICAL** at the Broadwater Theatre Main Stage through February 20, 2022; log onto [singingrevolutionthemusical.com](http://singingrevolutionthemusical.com)

