

Esther, the Musical – an unexpected back-story

“Holy crap - what just came out of my mouth?”

Randall Craig was just being told that chemo for his aggressive form of leukemia would not be effective, and that the treatment was going to be stopped. His only chance of survival was a Bone Marrow Transplant - if only a donor could be found. That was in 2017. We caught up with him in early 2020, and asked about how this experience translated into *Esther the Musical*.

LJ: First of all, we're very happy to be doing this interview – are you out of the woods?

RC: I'm thrilled to be here as well, and I've got good momentum. I'm certainly not out of the woods, but I remain very positive.

LJ: Tell us about your decision to write the musical...

RC: I was at an extremely low point, and the future looked bleak. My family and friends were gathered around my bed – it really was touch-and-go. I figured that if I were to survive, then in my extended recovery period, I would need something to do. I blurted out that I would write a Broadway-style musical. And then I thought: Holy crap – what just came out of my mouth!

LJ: Is that all you thought?

RC: Yes, at first. Then I did two things. I ordered a ton of books from Amazon: from choral arranging to jazz voicings to a ton of books on history. Reading was tough at that time of my treatment, but getting the books ordered, and seeing the pile of them sitting there was a huge incentive. The second thing I did was get a full digital piano for my hospital room. It took up a lot of space, but it was pivotal. I played that thing for hours, every day. It was in Princess Margaret Cancer Centre where I turned my improvisational work into the melodies within *Esther*. It was also nice to share my music with all of the patients, families, and medical staff.

LJ: So what is your musical pedigree?

RC: Perhaps like most people, I started in high school. For me it was the flute, piccolo, then sax (alto and baritone). I took a first year university performance course, again on flute, and later, adult flute lessons.

As a teenager, I started writing music, which is very difficult to do on a woodwind. So I started to play my parents' piano – usually 2-3 hours every day. There is no substitute for piano practice... except perhaps piano lessons, which sadly I didn't take. So every day in the hospital I did the piano exercises that I avoided as a child, just to improve my dexterity.

LJ: Tell me about Esther...

RC: *Esther the Musical* is Rosa Parks meets Donald Trump. *Esther* is the modern-day heroine who inspires people to believe that everyone - no matter their humble beginnings or background – has it within themselves to make a positive difference.

The story itself has a long pedigree: like *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the *Esther* story is 2500 years old. *Esther the Musical* has heroes, villains, love interests, and several plot twists.

It is set in the present day, and like our diverse society, has a diverse musical style, from funk, to rap, rock, and fusion. Its message is timeless, and resonates in today's world of #MeToo, corporate greed, social justice, and the freedom to think for yourself.

LJ: What's the story?

Picture Mr. Verious, the not-so-smart CEO of a major conglomerate. After his VP quits, he recruits a replacement – *Esther*, who he comes to love.

His conniving advisor, Ham, despises people who are different – like *Esther* – and takes his hatred out on all who believe as she does. *Esther* summons the strength to thwart Ham's plans, and ultimately prevails: good triumphs over evil.

LJ: Was there a particular turning point in the musical's history?

RC: Can I say three? I still remember, shortly after my transplant, opening up the computer and writing the first song. I thought it was excellent. The next day, not so much so – which meant a complete re-write, one of many that I would later do. The next turning point was when the manuscript was finished: I had finally figured out how to move the story into the present, yet still be true to the underlying characters and story. The third turning point was when I put the finishing touches on the music for the Finale, and played it for my wife. The finale is a very complex piece that weaves so many of the melodies together in a very powerful way.

LJ: Powerful how so?

RC: The finale finishes the story, and does so in the context of a battle between good (*Esther*) and evil (her antagonist). In the end, *Esther* and the chorus are singing the anthem song *We Are Believers*, while pictures of some of the heroes who also stood up for the rights of others are projected in the background: from Nelson Mandela, to Martin Luther King Jr, to Mother Teresa, to many more. In the end, the audience realizes that we all can be *Esther*, and *Esther* is each of us. Very powerful.

LJ: Is there anything that you were particularly proud of?

RC: We recently had a “Musical Preview Event” for the *Esther* soundtrack. There were about 100 folks at the event. You couldn't imagine how awesome to hear all of these people singing together during the finale – it was electric!

LJ: So what's next for Esther?

RC: Next up: bringing it to the stage. Eventually, and hopefully, a Tony.

Esther the Musical was written by Randall Craig; the soundtrack is available on Spotify and Apple Music. More at www.MusicalEsther.com.