

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

*Armistead Maupin's
Tales of the City
A New Musical*

LIBRETTO BY MUSIC AND LYRICS BY
JEFF WHITTY JAKE SHEARS AND JOHN GARDEN

BASED ON ARMISTEAD MAUPIN'S *TALES OF THE CITY*
AND *MORE TALES OF THE CITY*

CHOREOGRAPHY BY LARRY KEIGWIN

DIRECTED BY JASON MOORE

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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FINDING ATLANTIS

An Interview with the Creators of *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City: A New Musical*

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

The new musical version of Armistead Maupin's immortal *Tales of the City* that opened at A.C.T. this spring was five intensely creative years in the making. During that time, despite the demands of their own individual artistic careers, the four original collaborators—playwright Jeff Whitty (*Avenue Q*), composer/lyricists Jake Shears and John Garden (both of Scissor Sisters), and director Jason Moore (*Avenue Q* and *Shrek: The Musical*)—found time in their hectic schedules to come together for a series of developmental workshops and readings, as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of writing/composing sessions, casting auditions, design meetings, and conference calls, all focused on giving theatrical life to some of the most beloved characters in American popular literature. In April, just four days after the final phase of rehearsals for the world premiere production began at A.C.T., they sat down with us to reflect on the timeless universality of Maupin's *Tales* and the process of recreating his Atlantean bohemia on the American Conservatory Theater stage.

SO HOW DID THIS ALL BEGIN? I READ, JEFF, THAT YOUR PARTNER TOLD YOU TO WATCH THE *TALES OF THE CITY* MINISERIES DURING A TRANSATLANTIC FLIGHT.

JEFF WHITTY: Yes, on April 22, 2006—almost exactly five years ago—I took a plane to London for *Avenue Q* casting, and Steve said I should watch the *Tales of the City* DVDs. But I'd read the books in 1993 and loved them so much I didn't want to. Then I thought, "Oh, what the hell." [The movies] are very close to the books structurally, and they begin the way the books begin, with Mary Ann telling her mother that she's not coming back to Cleveland, that she's going to stay and live in San Francisco. And I thought, "That's how a musical begins—a character entering this new world." The more I watched, the more excited I got, and basically I landed in London and shot off an email to start inquiring about whether the rights were available to do a musical.

AND ARMISTEAD APPROVED THE IDEA? HE'D SEEN *AVENUE Q*, I BELIEVE.

WHITTY: Yes. I met with him in June of 2006, and we hit it off famously. That was really the first big step, getting Armistead's blessing to move forward. I knew then that it would



(L to R) The *Tales of the City* originating team: director Jason Moore, librettist Jeff Whitty, and composer/lyricists John Garden and Jake Shears. Photo by David Allen Studio.

be a huge project. I'm not sure I quite realized *how* huge it would turn out to be (*laugh*), but it was very exciting to think of doing a musical with several intertwining stories. For years [after *Avenue Q*] I'd been saying no to musicals, because they didn't excite me, but this project excited me for all kinds of reasons, mostly because I just loved the books so much, and the characters.

THEN DID YOU GO TO JAKE SHEARS FIRST, OR TO JASON MOORE?

WHITTY: I knew that I wanted to work with Jason, because we had survived *Avenue Q* together. (*Laughter*) We'd developed a working relationship, where we'd moved past a lot of the communication issues you can have with strangers, and so I knew his sensibility was good and I knew how excellent he is at developing new works, and rigorous—that's one of our key words—dramaturgically. I made this soundscape, a CD of songs that I thought sounded like the show. It was all 1970s music, except that I included some tracks from the Scissor Sisters, because it just felt right. We were going around and around with composers, and there weren't that many exciting ideas, except for the Scissor Sisters. And then it occurred to me—I'd known Jake for years at this point, so I just shot him an email . . . What did I say in the email?

JAKE SHEARS: "I've got this idea for making a show that's really kind of queer and fun and takes place in the '70s and has trannies and would you be interested?" (*Laughter*) I said, "Sure! Tell me more." And he wrote back and said, "It's *Tales of the City*." I think I must have responded immediately.

WHITTY: You did.