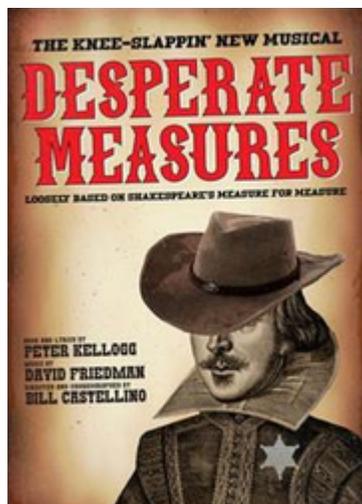


On Desperate Measures: An interview with Joseph Hayward and Victoria Casillo



As digital programming begins to explode, one playwright who is continually produced is the always omnipresent (and cost effective) William Shakespeare.

I was able to speak with two artists about an acclaimed adaptation of the Bard set in a unique environment — the Old West.

Desperate Measures is a musicalized version of Measure for Measure, and I had a chance to speak with the associate director of the Original Off-Broadway production and its most recent director, Joseph Hayward, and most recent choreographer Victoria Casillo as the show gets ready to make its way across the country.

Kevin Broccoli: How did “Desperate Measures” come into your lives?

Joseph Hayward: I was the associate director for both New York productions. Our show began at The York Theatre Company in 2017 and, after extending three times, transferred to New World Stages in 2018. The show went on to win the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical and the Drama Desk Award for Best Music and Lyrics.

I could have never anticipated the impact *Desperate Measures* would have on my life. Shows like this don't come around often, but when they do, it feels like a miracle. I'm extremely grateful to Bill Castellino (original director and choreographer) for bringing me on board, and who actually introduced me to Victoria!

Victoria Casillo: I didn't work on the original production of *Desperate Measures*, but I did happen to attend the opening night performance at New World Stages. I was so blown away by the show that I went back to see it a second time! It was the smartest, funniest piece of theater that I had seen in a long time, and its humor and heart really stayed with me.

A few months later, I serendipitously received a phone call asking if I would be interested in meeting Bill Castellino (director/choreographer of the original *Desperate Measures*). He was interviewing candidates to be his assistant choreographer for his new Off-Broadway show. I was so excited- I knew that I had to get the job! I so wanted to learn from the people who worked on *Desperate Measures* how to create that kind of special magic on stage. Not only was I hired for one project, but I have been lucky enough to work alongside Bill (and Joseph) for the past year and a half.

Getting the opportunity to be the choreographer for the production of *Desperate Measures* at Saint Michael's Playhouse feels like a full circle moment because I will finally get to work on the piece that inspired me in such a big way. Sharing the experience with Joseph as the director — someone who was with *Desperate Measures* from the beginning — is very exciting and humbling.

KB: Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" seems like an interesting fit for the Western genre. Can you talk a little bit about how the elements of the source material lend themselves to it?

JH: The Wild West was dangerous, lawless and tough, which makes for a thrilling backdrop to *Measure for Measure*. It's a fascinating lens to re-examine the timeless themes of this show, such as justice, judgement and God.

KB: It's so hard for smaller shows to get attention, but it seems like this one really made an impact. What do you think helps distinguish itself?

VC: The writing of *Desperate Measures* truly sets the musical apart. Peter Kellogg's book is so smart — it makes entire audiences cackle, but also causes them to think. David Friedman's score is one that audiences walk out of the theater singing. The show isn't based on a TV show, movie or pop star, which feels so rare this day and age. The themes of *Desperate Measures* - law, virtue, the idea that life itself is a gift — are so relevant to today's culture. The show is special because it's thoroughly entertaining,

intelligent, heartwarming and topical. I really can't do *Desperate Measures* justice by talking about it alone ... you need to come see it!

JH: The show has the perception of being small, but the characters and themes are larger-than-life. *Desperate Measures* could easily be expanded with an ensemble, and I hope to do that one day. I think our audiences really respond to the writing and music. It's exceptionally smart (it's all in rhyming iambic pentameter!) and laugh-out-loud funny. Peter Kellogg and David Friedman created a beautiful, original show that grows more relevant by the day.

KB: Can you talk a little bit about your professional histories and how they prepared you for a show like this one?

JH: I was studying to be an actor at The American Academy of Dramatic Arts, when a teacher asked if I'd like to assist her director friend on an Off-Broadway show. I said yes, and my life changed. Since then, I've been an associate or assistant to some extraordinary people like Bill Castellino, Ray Roderick, Christian Borle, Carol Kane, James Morgan ... the list goes on (and continues to grow!). They shaped me as a director, and continue to inspire me.

VC: My work with Bill Castellino has definitely helped prepare me to do *Desperate Measures*. I have been lucky enough to work with him on choreography for two Off-Broadway world premieres, as well as a movie musical. He has greatly influenced the way I think about dance in terms of storytelling. Every movement in a dance sequence/musical number should clearly establish character, establish setting, or further the story. It is nice to come up with movement that is interesting to look at, but the work becomes deeply satisfying when the choreography propels the story forward. Bill is such a master at clearly telling a story through choreography, movement and stage pictures, and I am excited to bring these skills that I've learned from him into our production of *Desperate Measures*. It is important to honor Peter Kellogg and David Friedman's story in our production at Saint Michael's Playhouse, and I want my choreography to do just that.

KB: There are so many Shakespearean adaptations, including musicals. What do you think it is about the Bard that inspires so many artists to try remaking it in their image?

JH: Each production is unique and has its own set of challenges and opportunities. I would never try to recreate a show, because each actor and designer is different. I love to be surprised by new ideas and always keep my mind open to new possibilities. This is what makes each production one-of-a-kind.

VC: The universal themes in many of Shakespeare's plays are the reason that so many artists want to

tell his stories over and over. Another musical that has had a huge impact on my life and career is *West Side Story*, which is, of course, a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I have worked on six different productions of *West Side*, and I am always amazed that no matter where the show is done, it sells out and gets extended. This speaks to the fact that a story of unrequited love amidst two battling families is one that registers with audiences everywhere! Shakespearean stories can be told in updated ways, again and again.

KB: What would you say the most challenging elements of the show are in terms of creating and re-creating a production of it?

VC: I think the trickiest part of *Desperate Measures* is casting. The six characters each have challenging vocal, physical, comedic and dramatic demands. It is such a puzzle to find actors who meet these demands, and also fit together as an ensemble. For example, Johnny must believably read as Susanna's brother; Johnny and Bella must believably read as a couple; Johnny must also have the range to belt out the end of "It's Good to Be Alive." It's complicated! To my total delight, I could not have been more blown away by the cast that we found. One of the greatest joys of this entire process was watching our actors in their auditions; they came in prepared, sang the material brilliantly, physically embodied the characters and also fit into our puzzle. Both Joseph and I agree that we've assembled an incredibly strong ensemble!

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KB: Musicals are, in some ways, the ultimate artistic collaboration. Can you talk about your experience collaborating together on this piece?

VC: I think the exciting part about my collaboration with Joseph is that there is a huge sense of trust and respect between us; we're not working from a place of ego. I have deep faith in his ideas and intellect, and I know that if he wants to make a change or try something different, it will likely make the work even better. He also really listens to me and takes in what I have to say. I revere his work ethic and his understanding of the piece. I'm not afraid to voice my opinion to him, and I also can't wait to hear his thoughts when I have a new idea. Having this kind of trust and respect for your partner is special. Joseph also ALWAYS makes me laugh, especially when I become too serious! We work so hard, but we also laugh equally as hard. I hope this joy and humor comes through on stage.

JH: Victoria and I both had Bill Castellino as a mentor, and I think that's why we have a very similar approach to the work. Our first dedication is to the script, and we study it intensely. We are responsible

for telling this story as clearly, creatively and honestly as we can. Victoria's notes are always very detailed and she is full of great ideas. She's an incredible dancer and storyteller, with a wicked sense of humor.

Our first big challenge was to find the actors. This is arguably the most important part of our job, and I could not be more excited, or proud, of our cast. I get goosebumps just thinking about it!

KB: As so many artists move into the digital realm to keep producing work during the quarantine, do you think there's something from his work that speaks to us now more than before?

VC: You know, I really think that the *Desperate Measures* score speaks to me more during the pandemic than ever before. I would encourage any artists who are looking for a way to connect to their emotions during quarantine to sing and dance to this music. "Life Takes You By Surprise" is definitely apropos - so many things about this situation we find ourselves in could never have been predicted, but it's important to keep our faith. I've been wondering why conditions have come down so much harder on some than others during this pandemic, and it takes me back to "That's Just How It Is." Finally, I have been trying to remind myself that even when we feel pain and suffering, life is still a blessing. This could not be more beautifully articulated than in "It's Good to Be Alive." More than ever, this music is relevant.

JH: *Desperate Measures* is about fighting to stay alive against all odds. It's about seeing injustice in the world and wanting to change it. It's about teamwork. It's about love and understanding. I think these themes mean more to us now than ever before. It will be enormously cathartic and healing to be gathered in a theater again and hear this story.

KB: *Desperate Measures* seems like a perfect fit for regional theaters. Do you see it as being a show that has a lasting life in smaller markets?

JH: It already is! In addition to our production at St. Michael's Playhouse, *Desperate Measures* will be playing The Utah Shakespeare Festival, Manoa Valley Theatre in Hawaii, The Good Theater in Portland, Maine, Clackamas Repertory Theatre in Oregon, and several others. Hopefully Rhode Island will be next! In the meantime, please tell all your friends in Vermont to visit saintmichaelsplayhouse.org

VC: YES! For one thing, the show truly is appealing to audiences of all ages - young audience members in their 20s will laugh just as hard at these jokes as will audience members in their 80s. *Desperate Measures* was originally done with a cast of six, so the show works well for smaller theaters. (We have an amazing cast of six for our production at Saint Michael's Playhouse.) However, the cast size can

easily be expanded to include an ensemble of nuns, salon goers and cowboys, making it a perfect fit for larger theaters. I hope that the show gets produced again and again so that others might feel a bit of the magic that I felt when I walked out of New World Stages. I know the Saint Michael's Playhouse audiences are going to eat up this piece with our sensational cast.