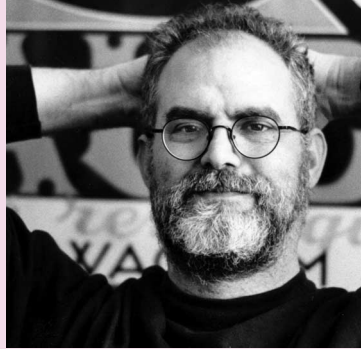


## QUESTIONS FOR WILLIAM FINN

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*Literary Manager Ilana Brownstein spoke with composer and lyricist, Bill Finn about Falsettos, Boston, and his future projects.*

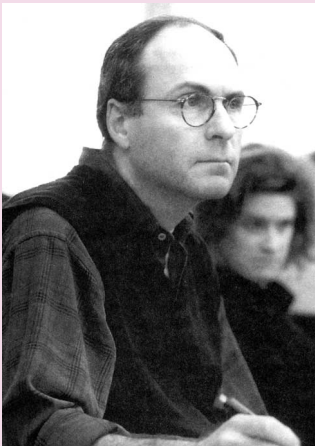


William Finn

**In all your work, you have an uncanny knack for taking what are usually the darkest moments in life and treating them with heart and humor. Can you put your finger on what draws you to these kinds of portrayals?**

This is just the way I am — I am so prone to depression, so I skirt it any way I can. I try to find what's joyous in every day. Getting through the day isn't always easy, it's sometimes hard to find the most enjoyable route to travel through. So, in my writing, I try to make that map a lot more clear. I think it must be a reflex.

**It's been over 25 years since Marvin made his first appearance in *In Trousers*, and almost 15 years since *Falsettos* premiered. What does *Falsettos* mean to you now?**



James Lapine

I think the show is looking really good for being 25, which pleases me to no end. These days, more than ever, the show is about family. It was always about family, but now that is so much clearer to me. Funny — right before *Falsettoland* opened, James Lapine and I were being interviewed. The reporter asks us what the musical was about, and at the exact same time, Lapine said AIDS, and I said family. I never looked at it as a disease play at all — it was just about my life, and the experiences we were all having. It was something I had to write about. But really the show is — all my shows are — about the healing nature of art.

**I know in the past you indicated that there may be more of Marvin's story in the future — do you have any plans for that?**

Everyone wants more Marvin, but I don't know what to write about. Lapine thinks there's more for Marvin, and because Lapine is always right, I think he must see something I don't see yet. So who knows? Maybe, in time?

## Speaking of James Lapine, you have been incredibly productive collaborators — what brings you back together again and again?

Well, he directs so brilliantly, and he's an astonishingly gifted collaborator — he has so many ideas and an enormously fertile mind. I don't think as fast as he does, I often get stuck, and he's always there to pick up the pieces and make sense of it all. And multi-talented! He's a director, a conceiver, a book writer — amazing. He just directed my latest piece, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, which is now on Broadway, and really I can't imagine anyone else working on the show.

## Your post-*Falsettos* pieces — *A New Brain*, *Elegies*, and *Spelling Bee* — have been hailed by audiences and critics alike. What's next on your plate?

I'm writing something for the new theatre at Williams College, my alma mater, which is set to open soon; I'm writing it with some of my favorite students. I just hope to teach more and write more as I get older. I started teaching five years ago; it's total fun and I have wonderful students, many of whom are my current collaborators. *Spelling Bee* is full of my students — writing, producing, and performing — so it's great for me, and great for them. They're younger than I am, and have more energy, but I'm the dad. I tell them when to clean the room. It's fantastic, they *have* to listen to me.

## a falsettos glossary

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**Canadelach:** Matzoh balls, usually eaten in chicken soup.

**Gefilte:** A classic food for Passover and other holidays, these fish cakes are made from a mix of ground whitefish, chopped onions, egg, and matzoh meal, and are usually eaten with horseradish.

**Dreck:** Trash, junk, garbage.

**Kitsch:** From *Kitschen*, meaning art that is sentimental or vulgar, often indicating pretension or bad taste.

**Knish:** This quintessential Jewish street-food is a stuffed bun traditionally comprised of mashed potatoes or kasha wrapped in

dough, then baked or fried. In New York, most eat it drenched in yellow mustard.

**Rugelach:** A rolled cookie of cream cheese dough spread with a sweet, nutty filling.

**Schmo:** A shortened version of *Schmuck*, meaning someone who's a little stupid, or an unwitting clown.

**Schpieling:** From *Schpiel*, meaning a story, or sales pitch.

**Trayf:** Something forbidden; non-kosher foods

**Tsouris:** Suffering, or trouble.

## reCOLLECTIONS: THE BIRTH of a musical

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Catherine Cox, Sherry Hursey, Tony Cummings, and Kathy Garrick in *In Trousers*; photo: Martha Swope

I first met William Finn [in 1978] because he kept calling me up at Playwrights Horizons, demanding that I come to a musical audition at his house — at 11pm. I didn't particularly want to go to the Upper West Side at 11 o'clock at night, but Bill usually gets what he wants, so I went. The performance started way after midnight — "important" people from Washington were late — and what I heard was something very brilliant and very, very angry. We were not producing musicals at that time, so nothing happened. A few months later, Bill called me again demanding that I or someone come to hear an audition of a new piece called *In Trousers*. I sent Ira Weitzman, a staff member with a strong interest in musicals, and he came back and said let's do it. I had wanted to start working with young composers and lyricists, to give them the same support and exposure that our playwrights enjoyed, and so Bill turned out to be the first.

... [Bill's work] is entirely sung, and yet it demands that we respond to it as we would a play. In the world of Marvin, Trina, Jason, Whizzer, and Mendel, singing is the most direct means of communication, and there is an enormous sense of urgency to their song. There is a great joy as well. Finally, what strikes me as I listen to the characters grapple with passions that they cannot control, is that these people are so damn articulate and aware: How can they possibly get themselves into such messes? And that dilemma between clear intelligence on one hand and emotional confusion on the other is what makes the show accessible to so many people.

— André Bishop  
*Artistic Director of Lincoln Center Theater (formerly of Playwrights Horizons)*

## THOUGHTS FROM THE COLLABORATORS

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Director Daniel Goldstein and Musical Director Michael Friedman took a break from rehearsals to chat with Literary Manager Ilana Brownstein about *Falsettos*.

**You both have worked on numerous musicals over the course of your careers — what draws you to the form?**

**DG:** It sounds like I'm joking, but it's nice when people sing in rehearsal.

**MF:** No, it's true. Aside from being fun, it allows for and creates a level of stylization that's exciting. It adds to the theatricality of the experience.

**DG:** Much like the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, the music gives you clues about how to act the text; melody teaches you how to interpret the words.



Michael Friedman, Jacob Brandt, and Daniel Goldstein  
in rehearsal

**What makes *Falsettos* different from other musicals you've helmed?**

**MF:** The fact that it's sung-through is so different; there are very few musicals like this in the canon. In *Falsettos*, some scenes feel like big songs from a traditional musical, and then there are scenes in which the dialogue is very simply sung. It's conversational —

**DG:** Almost like recitative —

**MF:** And the thing about Finn is that he threads things together very cleverly. One thing falls seamlessly into another, and it works in a way that only Finn could mastermind.

**What about the structure of the story?**

**DG:** I don't think you could tell this story any other way. The main analogy of the piece is having one's voice change, the process of change, the falsetto. It makes perfect sense that it's sung-through, that these characters communicate in this way. And I love the difference between the two acts — written ten years apart — as you see these people come of age.

— dramaturgy notes by Ilana M. Brownstein