



BWW Interviews: Husband and Wife Writing Team Diana Martin & Richard Levinson

[Back to the Article](#)

by Don Grigware



*Jumpin' Jehovah! A giant lobster edging in on young Priscilla's blueberry pancake feast! Grab that lobster! Save those pancakes!! This plot sounds quite the yummy treat for kids and adults alike! It sure has my mouth watering! Husband and wife team [Diana Martin](#) (book) and [Richard Levinson](#) (songs), pianist for the recent hit *Louis and Keely Live at the Sahara*, are collaborating on *Priscilla's Perfect Day* to open Saturday June 12 at the GROUP rep in NoHo.*

They discuss the challenges of mounting a children's show.

What was the greatest challenge in putting together a children's play? Particularly as opposed to regular adult fare?

DM: The challenge, actually the goal, was to create an entire performative event that would entertain all ages. A story that anyone could relate to... layered and nuanced and informed by historical theatrical conventions, conceits and musical genres. No stock, cardboard cutout characters that one often finds in standard Storybook Theatre. My primary responsibility is to cultivate a child's imagination. It is not necessary to be extremely literal and one does not need to resort to cartoonish tricks. I have the utmost respect for children's innate intelligence and have faith that they will get it, fill in what they need and then take it to another level within their own active imaginations.

RL: I think the first job, whether for adults or children, is to delight. This doesn't necessarily mean to just be funny or silly or giddy or wild, but to satisfy within the boundaries of the particular show. This is partly the responsibility of the written piece, but for children perhaps even more in the staging -- training focus where needed, but also to be stimulating wherever the audience happens to be looking or listening. A theater is always a dual environment, with the world of the play taking place in an actual space ; adults may be more accustomed to this than small kids, who might be just as interested at any particular

moment in the cool lights hanging from the ceiling or the sound of the piano. (For example, we are using the piano for some loud sound effects rather than record all literal cues .. much more eerie and magical.) So, the experience of going to a live show is in some ways more profound for a child-- the whole environment might well be something brand new and it's good for the creators to keep that in mind as they shape the show.

Most children's shows I've seen disappoint me, because they do not allow kids to interact with what's going on onstage? How are you surmounting this problem? Is there interplay with the audience?

RL: From first walking in to the welcome speech to action occurring not just on stage but from beside and behind should naturally involve the audience personally, and , of course, with a very large lobster chasing some very small clams around the theater, some of the kids might well feel very close to the action.

DM: The theatre is a living, breathing environment; a collaboration between the audience and the actors on the stage, the vibrations are real, not synthesized, and there is always the expectation that something new and spontaneous might occur at anytime. The audience feeds the actors and vice versa, it is a symbiosis. I liken this experience to the difference between reading books aloud to children as compared to them listening to a book on tape. The entire experience is "theatrical", the lobby, the people milling around before the House is open, the colorful cards for other shows, the cast photos, the programs, the sense of urgency when the lights flicker and you rush to your seat. Then you enter the House, see the set, the overture begins and the anticipation is palpable. Our curtain speech will explain theatre etiquette and encourage appropriate ways to show appreciation and delight. The actors may break the fourth wall and take the audience into their confidence so to speak. And in the tradition of English Panto there is a "chase" scene and a sing-along and, of course, after the show a Pancake Party with activities for kids in the Green Room, which will enable them to see the backstage workings of a theatre environment.

Diana, what specific element entertains kids most, do you think? The music, the jokes, visual stuff, hands on activities...?

DM: Children want real things, things that are relevant to their everyday lives. Children are natural storytellers and they will respond to the true as well as the whimsical. And they also want valid information... think of how a five year old will memorize the most complicated names of dinosaurs or all the planets in the solar system. So, I won't condescend in my writing, I have high expectations of their abilities to sort and filter. I tried to incorporate as many historical conventions of playmaking as possible into this particular play from the conceit of the neo-classical "well-made play" to elements of Aristotle's Poetics to the three unities of playwriting. From the Greeks, there is a Clam Chorus which is informed by the Greek Chorus, painted rolling flats - "pinakes" - for scene shifting, and a "Prologue" to set the tone. Musical genres are explored in a fanciful way. For example, there is a Blues singing Blueberry and Clams who dance a traditional Cakewalk. Our **choreographer Michele Bernath** researched and incorporated historically accurate steps into the dance performed by a Mama Clam and her three children! We also have a Dream Ballet that is informed by the one in Carousel. By utilizing diverse theatrical conventions and musical styles, it is my intention that children's minds will be primed so that they recognize those elements the next time they see a play or hear a concert.

Richard, how do you approach working on this piece as opposed to say the very

adult Louis and Keely show?

RL : I don't think I write with any really different approach, outside of age-appropriateness. I tend to work technically, from word-play and structure backwards to general theme, so the process is similar no matter the project. I would say that generally, as songwriter, I wouldn't condescend to an audience whatever the age and it's always a good idea to aim a little high rather than try to make everything easy and simple. But I need to check my own fun sometimes and remember that getting too involved in manipulating lyrics can result in a song that is unsingable and unlistenable -- I think I've got these just about right!

Richard, what kind of music do you feel really gets to kids right now? What musically have you incorporated into this show?

RL: If the music marketing mavens are any guide, young kids are just smaller versions of teenagers. I think this is cynical and just not very nice. But I'm not really an expert -- I just know that when kids hear the songs in *Priscilla's Perfect Day* they respond in a very natural, interested way. They learn them in a snap, and they are much wordier than most kids' fare I've heard. They are about subjects kids know and deal with -- family, pets, food, and lots of new language, which is in itself a sort of delicious treat.

I really feel that adults are nothing more than big kids. You have to entertain them as well, since they bring the kids to the show and are also a part of the audience. Diana, how do you feel you have achieved this with Priscilla...?

DM: The premise of *Priscilla* started with my own experiences of family vacations, relationships, things people have said to me through the years, and my observations of children's behaviors. In *Little Women* Professor Baer admonishes Jo to write what she knows. I read that book for the first time when I was eight years old. So, I write from the heart and it is therefore my heartfelt hope that universal themes found in family dynamics (including sibling rivalry!) appeal to the kid in all of us.

Priscilla's Perfect Day, directed by Jeremy Aldridge, plays Saturday mornings at 11:00 am June 12 through July 17 at the GROUP rep @ the [Lonny Chapman](http://www.lonnychapman.com) Theatre, 10900 Burbank Boulevard in North Hollywood.

Call 323-822-7898 for tickets or visit:

<http://www.thegrouprep.com/>

Running time: one hour, followed by Pancake Party and craft making at noon.