



A Conversation with Jessica Carmona and Diane Currie Sam, Co-Librettists and Co-Lyricists

Why did you Create Olivia O?

The story of Olivia O emerged from a series of feelings, thoughts and ideas that were coalescing in mind all at the same time. First and foremost, it began a sense of rage about the family separations that were happening at the United States/Mexican border.

When the stories of what was happening to the families came out, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It felt so sad, cruel. I felt (knew), as a mother, as a former counselor to children and families, that the parent-child bond is fundamental. Severing it is an act of betrayal, a breaking of spirit that can reverberate through generations. I know this in my soul, as deep and true as anything I've ever known. I know how it hurts, and how it damages people.

So, I couldn't stop thinking about it, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed hopeless, like I had a complete inability to do anything about it. I was powerless. The system was too strong, the cruelty and indifference too entrenched, I lived too far away, I had no influence or voice in US politics, etc, etc, etc.

So I was caught between this driving force inside me (that was sort of screaming at me) that wanted to move into action, and this feeling of not having power to act.

But there was one thing I did know. I knew I was a writer and a storyteller. That was a source of power that I could tap into. I know I am someone who at least can write and tell a story in a way that moves people into their hearts. I knew I had that skill. Once I started to connect into that feeling, I felt that writing out a story was something I had to do - that I couldn't not do it.

There is so much sadness, so much loss all around us sometimes that we turn away. (Sometimes I turn away. It feels too much). But I don't want to be that person that turns away. Storytelling, art, theatre, - it opens hearts. I didn't have any big ideas beyond knowing I was a writer, and knowing I had to write. There was a story forming in my mind, and a way I thought I could tell it. So, every Sunday, week after week, I took my laptop to the library, I sat down, followed my feelings and wrote a story.



Was there an event / happening that directly prompted the story?

Yes! There were a few things. As I mentioned, the family separations that were happening at the US/Mexican border was a big topic on the news. Specifically there was an audio clip aired on the Rachel Maddow Show on NBC news about a young girl separated from her mother in a detention center crying and asking if she could call her aunt. That became the basis for the idea of a girl trying to connect with her aunt in the United States.

In my own life, I had written and delivered a speech in support of the teacher's union and their fight in my local community for better, more equitable funding of the school system. In the speech, I called our local politicians to task for creating a 'have' vs 'have not' type education system, and used the Oliver Twist story as an extended metaphor (and performed a satirical version of "Consider Yourself") to make a point about how systemic poverty arises from inequitable and heartless policies.

That sparked the "child lost in a cruel system" plotline (and the name "Olivia").

At the same time, I saw another news clip about an activist at the U.S./Mexican border who was charged with felonies for leaving water and providing shelter for migrants, and a video clip about how the community was coming together in support of him, and to advocate for better treatment and demilitarization at the border. That became the basis for the intertwining stories of Isabel and the Activist group.

The villains were inspired by another news clip I saw where they were interviewing a "MAGA" type guy in a diner somewhere in the United States. They asked him to comment about the child separations and he answered "you're not going to get me all teary-eyed about it" - I was so angry! I was yelling at the screen "YOU SHOULD BE TEARY-EYED!!" "You should care!!". A villain is not always a visible or obvious monster. In my mind, that man became the villain - a callous, indifferent person out for themselves alone - Bill Collins, the abusive foster father.

While I knew that my imagined 'villain' would be someone so closed off from their feelings they wouldn't care enough to read or come watch whatever I had written, I also knew that there would be some people who would come to the show or read the story, and connect to the characters, feel compassion and empathy for them. I hoped that through the story of Olivia O, they would start to care, start to see things differently, and act more humanely in this world. I was captivated by the power of stories to connect into hearts and help people feel, understand, and make connections with each other.



Jessica Carmona
Lyricist, Librettist



Diane Currie Sam
Librettist, Lyricist



Gil Yaron
Music



Jennica Carmona
Director

Why a musical and not a just a drama?

I love the musical genre, as I think it allows us to deep dive into strong feelings quickly, both for the story/characters and for the audience. As writers/lyricists, it gives us a chance to be creative with the story - I think you can 'get away' with cutting right to the depth of meaning in a song quickly and directly that you can't always do in a purely spoken drama (or is harder to do!). Also, a song (and dance) can add quirkiness, creativity, passion and humor to a story, which is important in a show like Olivia O, because you ultimately want to not only entertain and enlighten, but also to leave the audience with a feeling of hope and community. We want them to leave with a deeper empathy, but also feeling empowered. If the audience is singing a song or humming some music as they leave, you know they've connected emotionally to the story. Also, the story I was seeing come together, plot wise, had what felt to me like 'musical moments'. It's fun to write a musical, and I love a good metaphor - the moment where you 'find the song' while you're writing a scene is so rewarding!

What do you hope your audiences will take away from this production?

I hope that the audiences will take away three main things:

- The reality of the inhumane treatment of undocumented immigrants coming to the country and the need to address it immediately. I think many Americans are not fully aware of how many families are separated in the process and how it negatively impacts the children by rupturing the family fabric and creating a condition where children are traumatized, depressed and anxious. Keeping any human being, let alone young children, in cages apart from their parents is cruel.
- Enlighten audiences about the nature of immigration and the root causes which include escaping from poverty, violence and persecution.
- Inspire audiences with a sense of hope; that when you work together as a community for the things you want, that you can really make a difference. The road may be hard, with many obstacles. But if you stick to what you believe in, and work together as a team, you can achieve a goal. When you follow your heart, you will be successful.

From a musical theater perspective, Olivia O shares a message and is not for entertainment only. It seems funding is perhaps more available to those that are for entertainment. How would you suggest we take action in shifting this practice?

I think we can think creatively and outside the box when it comes to funding a production like this. Rather than 1 or 2 major producers/funders, we can look to forming a team of producers. A team of perhaps 5, 6, or even 7 investors. There are a few recent Broadway musicals that have followed this model and it is becoming more and more common, especially after COVID 19 which really hurt theaters. The Public Theatre in New York City is just one example of many. A Strange Loop was another recent example of a musical that had a list of celebrity producers and theater who each invested a certain amount, this is an example of partnership-based model for producing. As activists, we can partner with theater as well as activist organizations that share our values of immigrant rights and social justice themes. It will engage and attract those audiences that love musicals and also care deeply about human rights and want to make a difference.

Giancarlo Lopez served as your Artivism Ambassador during your presentation. Did you stay in touch?

Giancarlo Lopez was introduced to us by the Artivism Team, and he provided the introductions when we shared a few of our songs from the musical on February 26th, 2024 at the Virtual Artivism event. During that event, he gave a bio for each of us and guided the discussion and feedback session after we presented. He had wonderful, positive and professional energy. He shared with us that he had a theater background. We were so excited to connect with him shortly after that event to invite him in as Stage Manager for the production. He is wonderful in every way. A true theater professional. We hope that we get to continue working with him on this production and others!

<https://www.oliviaomusical.com/producer-info-kit>



Giancarlo Lopez
Stage Manager

Giancarlo Lopez

"Reconnecting with theater through Artivism has unveiled profound layers of community and creativity, showing that every artistic expression can ignite change. My introduction to 'Olivia O' via Artivism allowed me to meet its creators virtually. This connection inspired me to reach out and opened the door to contribute significantly to their production. Ultimately, they entrusted me with the role of stage manager. Art is not just a passion—it's a profound dialogue with the world, constantly evolving and deeply transformative, urging us to explore, understand, and reshape our collective narratives."

Instagram at @G_Prism_ for more updates and engagements.



"Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it."
Augusto Boal