The World's Her Stage

Randall David Cook
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How a young woman from a small town in North Carolina ends up orchestrating the most anticipated Broadway revival of the 2006-07 theatre season — and owning an orphanage in India.

Times Square, 49th Street. Theatregoers stream out of various Broadway houses as curtains come down for the evening. Near the “Chicago” marquee, excited fans try to grab a glimpse of pop star Usher exiting the stage door after his much-publicized opening night.

Down the block stands the stately O’Neill Theatre, where a smaller but no less passionate crowd gathers at the stage door waiting for the stars of “Sweeney Todd” to emerge. Out comes Mary-Mitchell Campbell, dressed in black, arms full of papers and music. Fans hoping to see Patti LuPone sigh as they realize their wait will have to continue, and Campbell, unrecognized, walks purposefully past the mob of star-seekers. There’s still much work to be done this evening.

“Sorry it took me so long,” she says. “Kevin Kline wanted to say hello.”

A decade after graduating from Furman, Mary-Mitchell Campbell ’96 finds herself working on Broadway and in Hollywood as a music arranger and orchestrator for many of the most talented and successful people in the world of show business.

In November alone she made her Broadway debut as an orchestrator and also served as conductor for Tony Bennett’s 80th birthday celebration in Los Angeles, which was co-hosted by Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Bruce Willis, George Clooney and Billy Crystal and featured such performers as Kelly Clarkson, Marc Anthony and Rascal Flatts. And before the year is done her solo album, “Songs I Grew Up On,” will be released.

Even more extraordinary is that as exciting as her career is at the moment, a life in theatre is not what really drives her. She may make her living by entertaining, but she lives for her non-profit work, which she confirms with her description of why she works so tirelessly in both areas but has no problem prioritizing: “It’s a matter of feeling creative versus people dying.”

Last year Campbell created Artists Striving to End Poverty (STEP), a humanitarian organization that combines her love of the arts and artists with her desire to fight for the children most in need of advocacy. And in addition to getting the established artists with whom she works involved in STEP, she also has access to some of the country’s brightest upcoming talents as a faculty member of The Juilliard School, where she has been on staff since 2003 — and holds the distinction of being one of the youngest individuals to serve on that distinguished faculty.

How Campbell achieved so much in so little time is, well, a tale worth attending.

ACT I.

“Sweet Charity” launches Campbell’s career — and charity work becomes her passion.

To the consternation of many of her music professors, Campbell, who hails from Wilson, N.C., chose not to attend graduate school after Furman but to instead move to New York and brave the Great White Way by taking any and all gigs that came her way. And like a classic heroine in one of those Broadway musicals with which she now works, Campbell landed a doozy of a first job: collaborating with composer Cy Coleman on a special anniversary benefit performance of his biggest Broadway hit, “Sweet Charity,” at Lincoln Center.

The event, laden with some of the theatre’s biggest names, including the original Charity herself, Gwen Verdon (in what was to be her last stage performance), was a smashing success, and Campbell realized that she found gold in her first professional mentor: “It was like winning the lottery.” For despite his great success, Coleman, the Tony Award-winning composer of “City of Angels,” “Barnum” and “The Will Rogers Follies,” was not one
to rest on his laurels and was a strong supporter of younger musicians and composers in the theatre industry.

“He believed it was important to never stop creating, no matter how old you are,” says Campbell. “He was working 12-hour days at age 75 I learned from him to work hard and stay focused.” In addition to basically saying yes to any job offered to her, Campbell continued working with Coleman until his death from a heart attack in 2004.

The year 2004 also marked another major turning point in Campbell’s life.

The presidential election of that year upset her greatly. Partisanship aside, what bothered her most, she says, “was the way we treated each other as fellow Americans. All the name-calling, the insults. No real conversations were had, no attempts to connect were made, almost everything was fear-based.” Wanting to find something to take her mind off of the state of affairs at home, she booked a trip to spend time the following year in India, working with children.

The trip would change her life.

**When she first arrived in India, she stayed in Bangalore with the family of the doorman of her building in New York.** She lived in Bangalore for six weeks, volunteering in an orphanage for physically challenged girls. There she realized that corruption was rampant and that a lot of money meant for the orphanage was being pocketed.

She then went to Calcutta and volunteered at one of Mother Teresa’s missions. Upon arrival, she immediately picked up a little girl, then noticed a large sign on the wall that said, “Don’t pick up kids! They have highly contagious tuberculosis.”

Campbell remained healthy, and shortly thereafter she met a couple with an orphanage in the village of Nelamangala, in southern India. By chance, they were looking for someone to take the place over, a leader who wanted the orphanage for reasons greater than merely acquiring the land. After meeting Campbell and showing her the facility (also for disenfranchised girls), the couple offered to give the orphanage to her. Although surprised by the offer, Campbell accepted — and immediately realized she had an incredible challenge on her hands.

“I believe we’re responsible for what we know. Once I went to India, I then knew,” says Campbell. “We’re at a point where we can, one, accept things as they are, or two, choose to fight. Children are our only hope for creating a different world, and as a result, they’re worth fighting for.”

Upon returning stateside, Campbell landed the dream job of orchestrating the music of Stephen Sondheim, Broadway’s most revered composer, for an updated production of “Company,” the Tony-winning musical in 1971. The director would be John Doyle, a Brit known for having the performers in his shows double as an onstage orchestra. Given this style, the orchestrators in his productions play an enormously important role that puts them more in the spotlight than usual.

“It never occurred to me that I’d get this job,” Campbell says. “But John wanted an all-American team for this show, thinking it would be irresponsible, given the material, not to have one. So he needed a new collaborator. It’s all a bit magical and a bit overwhelming.”

And again, Campbell’s timing was perfection. Doyle, previously unknown in the United States, opened his version of “Sweeney Todd” on Broadway in 2005 to rave reviews and strong box office, so interest in “Company” escalated accordingly. Suddenly, producers were flying to see “Company” when it opened in Cincinnati last March.

Many were pleased with what they saw, including the critic from *The New York Times*, who called the show a “sleek, stylish production” and made ample note of Campbell’s contribution: “... The lively new orchestrations, by Mary-Mitchell Campbell, find the various couples communicating in musical notes, sometimes in happy harmony, sometimes in more complicated patterns. These wordless colloquies hint at the subterranean levels of congeniality that marriage can bring. ... We are reminded that for many long-partnered pairs, speech is only the most public of many modes of communication, and it can be a misleading one.”

Such a review from the *Times* can create momentum for a show, and soon thereafter, a transfer to New York with the entire cast was announced. In June, Doyle won the Tony Award for Best Director for “Sweeney Todd,” immediately making “Company” the must-see musical revival on Broadway this fall — and putting a very bright spotlight on Campbell.
INTERMISSION.
Campbell reflects on her experiences at Furman and the world at large through a series of rapid-fire questions.

Favorite class at Furman?
Social Problems. “The poverty tour [part of the class] opened my eyes and was the emotional foundation for what would become ASTEP. From that point forward I learned how important it is to use your heart in a way that is for the greater good.”

Favorite professor?
Dr. Albert Blackwell, religion.

Most embarrassing moment?
“While I was accompanying the Chamber Singers at a humor-in-music seminar in Tennessee in front of 350 music educators, the piano bench fell apart. Everyone thought it was part of the act. It wasn’t.”

Favorite part of the Furman experience?
“Having come from a conservatory background in high school [North Carolina School of the Arts], I really enjoyed the liberal arts aspect of Furman, being able to learn a wide array of materials.”

If you could go back and change one part of your Furman career, what would it be and why?
“I would work less and spend more time with my friends.”

Person you most admire?
Abraham George, a business entrepreneur who created the George Foundation after serving as a managing director at a global investment firm and founding and heading a software company, the profits of which he uses for the foundation.

People you most want to work with?
Alanis Morissette, Oprah Winfrey, Tony Kushner, “and people who have money to invest in the children!”

In 2002 you had the amazing opportunity to reassemble a “lost” Aaron Copland score for two star-studded performances of Ernest Hemingway’s “The World of Nick Adams,” the proceeds of which went to benefit the Painted Turtle Camp, one of Paul Newman’s summer programs for children with life-threatening diseases. Were you intimidated?
“Because of my age, a lot of the actors initially thought I was an intern. Once that idea was corrected, I cracked the whip as normal, just that time with Matt Damon, Julia Roberts and Tom Hanks, among others. It’s always important to be present, to be where you are and face illusion versus the realities of the world. As people we all have so much more in common than differences. We’d be better off recognizing that we’re all the same.”

What do you like most about the students at Juilliard?
“They’re very inspiring — all that unharnessed energy and enthusiasm. I work in the drama division. I much prefer actors to singers. It’s wonderful to watch their bravery as they make themselves vulnerable.”

Book most recently read?
India Untouched by Abraham George.
And The Zen of Fundraising.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?
“Many people have way more than they need. We don’t need to feel guilty for what we have, but we do need to be conscious of what we waste, such as buying food we don’t eat. When you think about that, the fact that people are starving in the world is inexcusable.”

What do you miss most about Furman?
ACT II.
HOW CAMPBELL TURNED SOMETHING PAINFUL INTO SOMETHING POSITIVE, AND WHY STATISTICS PLAY SUCH AN IMPORTANT PART IN HER LIFE.

REALITY HIT CAMPBELL UPON HER RETURN TO NEW YORK FROM INDIA.

She now owned an orphanage, which is called Ashakiran ("Rays of Hope"). And she needed a way to run and provide for it, a task that would be daunting for anyone, much less for someone with a full slate of work on the other side of the world. Many of her colleagues were surprised at her determination, including Sondheim, who upon hearing about Campbell's acquisition asked, "Couldn't you say no?"

Campbell couldn't say no, and instead started investigating how she could create a non-profit organization that would include managing the orphanage but would also be able to expand into other areas. Once again, timing played its part.

Campbell's marriage had ended, and the brownstone apartment she once owned had to be sold as part of the divorce settlement. Rather than buy another place, Campbell used her half of the money to create ASTEP.

ASTEP is an arts-based organization that strives to combat child poverty by bringing together artists and children who can benefit from artistic encounters. Campbell believes in the power of art to teach: "Art is a vehicle to get to know the children, get them to open up, get to the real issues. We use art to access all that other stuff that stands in the way of breaking the cycle of poverty."

And for the artists? "It gives actors real perspective. After they do one of our programs, they seem more grateful and have more appreciation for the many things we take for granted. They have something more to say in their art and have more important stories to tell."

ASTEP now has a staff of six. Though it relies on her heavily, Campbell hopes the organization will eventually function independently and be able to strengthen non-profit structures already in existence. As part of that latter mission, ASTEP has expanded beyond the orphanage in India to include:

> Workshops based in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where a shockingly high 32 percent of the population has HIV or AIDS.
> Workshops in Homestead, Fla., where the focus is on children of migrant workers with combined annual incomes of $10,000 to $15,000.
> ArtCents, the primary fundraising arm of ASTEP, in which artists donate their spare change, the idea being that "Small change makes big change."

WHEN SHE'S FEELING OVERWHELMED, WHAT KEEPS CAMPBELL GOING ARE THE STATISTICS, WHICH SHE CAN RATTLE OFF AS EASILY AS SHE CAN PLAY A C-MAJOR SCALE.

"A billion children live in poverty. That's half the children in the world. Six hundred forty million children have inadequate shelter, and 400 million struggle to get safe drinking water. I believe it's my duty to protect and educate those impoverished children with whom I come into contact."
She admits it's not always easy to maintain her intense schedule. She makes lots of lists, she says, and typically gets by on only four or five hours of sleep. At times, she adds, she has to force herself to stop and take a breath.

Still, she thrives on the pace and variety of her life. "I don't expect everyone to do what I do," she says, "but I do believe you can be very successful in your field and still be able to give a lot. You don't have to sacrifice ambition."

With that attitude and drive, it's not surprising that Campbell makes a strong impression on those she meets. Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, who have mastered the art of using celebrity to encourage others to support charity, are friends and mentors. Tom Hanks took her trick-or-treating with his kids.

Kristin Chenoweth, the Tony-winning actress starring in the current Broadway revival of "The Apple Tree," recently completed a concert tour with Campbell and says, "I love how committed she is to music, her students and her friends. I love that with her spare time, of which she barely has any, she started this non-profit ASTEP.

"All she wants is to stay on her path. She knows what her purpose is and will stay the course. She is an optimist and has incredible faith. That's why people love to be around her! She's a source of inspiration to all who meet her."

Tim Thomas, the executive director of MTV's Staying Alive Foundation and a member of the ASTEP board, says, "Mary-Mitchell is ruthless in her pursuit of the better side of human nature. Working with her has reinvigorated my own commitment to the world's poor and marginalized. She possesses an artist's curiosity and hunger for information about everything from the structure and governance of non-profits to land reform laws in northeastern India.

"The world would be a far better place if more artists could break out of their creative shells and engage with real, difficult issues like poverty, disease, corruption and oppression, [as] Mary-Mitchell has done. She is an incredibly inspiring force in my life these days."

The stages of Broadway present very different challenges to the realities of the world, realities that include great poverty and suffering. No matter the challenge, Campbell faces all obstacles in the same manner.

"You don't have to not be scared," she says. "The desire just has to be greater than the fear." [F1]

The author, a 1991 Furman graduate, is a playwright and businessman in New York City. His "In a Town Called Faith" is scheduled for an off-Broadway opening in 2007.