

# Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat

**A Proposal for Staging**

By Gibson DelGiudice

Ars Pro Concrete

Copyright © April 16, 2017

## I. ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Show*

*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* appeals to the public – and children especially – for a variety of reasons: it's short, easy to follow, fun, and it has a family-friendly storyline (appropriate for both performers and audience of a tender age), universal themes, and catchy music. The last is perhaps most important of all; as with much of Andrew Lloyd Webber's early work, the score is a cornucopia of styles and influences that manages to fit together for a very pleasing overall effect.

Originally written by Webber and Tim Rice as a 15-minute pop cantata for a school choir to sing at their Easter end-of-term concert, and gradually growing to (basically) its present form by its Broadway premiere in the early Eighties, *Joseph* finally solidified in its most known form – a Disney Renaissance-esque version complete with opening version of "Any Dream Will Do," closing Megamix, etc. – in the early Nineties. It is this last version with which audiences are probably most familiar today.

### *My Background with the Show*

*Joseph* is a show that's been close to my heart since I was a kid. A neighbor, who discovered I was into stuff like *Jesus Christ Superstar* way before anyone else my age would even be aware what "real" musicals were, introduced me to a handful of modern classics – *West Side Story*, *Godspell*, and *Joseph* – at about the same time. The first two left a much bigger impression, but *Joseph* still stuck with me. I nearly wore out a VHS copy of the Donny Osmond version from watching it constantly, I graduated from an audio cassette tape to a CD of the Canadian cast featuring Osmond, and I'd sing snippets of it over and over again around the house.<sup>1</sup>

I even thought (and still think) that Rice and Webber did an extremely clever job of telling parts of the story; "Benjamin Calypso" is a snappy way of demonstrating Judah's willingness to trade his life for that of his little brother, and who could resist "The Song of the King," when Pharaoh (the king in question) is wearing blue suede shoes, not unlike another famous "King"? In retrospect, it's not hard to see why it'd appeal to a kid; while the latest flavor of the show certainly appealed to a kid weaned on Disney Renaissance movies and constantly being told to use his imagination, the fact that it was initially written for kids to understand – and perform – helps make it more immediately accessible to them as an audience.

As I got older, and learned more about the show's origins, listened to earlier recordings, etc., what really struck me about *Joseph* was how wrong-headed the (admittedly popular) revival seemed to have been compared to the original productions. Over the decades that the show grew to become the much-loved (or loathed, depending on your mileage) piece of theater it now is, glitz and excessive jokes replaced a lot of the "heart" the show once had, degenerating it into a flurry of (mostly metaphorical, sometimes literal) funny hats and rubber chickens. I began to think it needed to be saved by a departure from that nonsense in order to restore its reputation.

---

<sup>1</sup> I've always loved the music, especially the invigorating, heart-pumping dance numbers.

Nothing illustrated this more clearly than comparing a local summer stock production (directed by Lennie Watts at Theatre by the Sea in 2000) with a professional tour of the show (starring Patrick Cassidy and *American Idol* contestant Amy Adams, in 2007). The former easily beat the latter when it came to inventiveness, storytelling, and evoking genuine emotion from the audience, letting a little air out of the over-inflated Nineties version and bringing back some of the "heart" (and terrific voices that I still wish someone had recorded to this day).

To me, "any dream will do," as they say, is an important message, now more than ever before, especially in this world of instant gratification, brought on by the amazingly high-tech century in which we live. It feels like dreams have been replaced by virtual reality. Everything we need – or think we need – is easily obtained with the touch of a button. That person, or situation, that we are dreaming about can be fully visualized with the click of a mouse. We want results, and we want them now!

This simple, age old story of a dreamer has withstood the test of time for a reason, and one doesn't need amazingly inventive sets, costumes, and lighting from a top-notch design team to tell it. Our job is simply to keep the audience riveted, to convince them to relax and allow themselves to dream again... and maybe to resist the urge to check their cell phone as well.

If I'm to direct *Joseph*, I want my production to be lean and to the point, to determine its current relevance, and to shine a new light on aspects of the show that have been previously invisible to an audience.

## II. PLAY ANALYSIS

A friend who heard I was working on these notes jokingly remarked that they'd love to see me try to find a deep underbelly to what they called "the musical theater equivalent of empty calories." People need to learn that they really shouldn't set a challenge for me to face. I just might surprise them.

Many productions of *Joseph* play it as an inspiring story of achievement, a tale of a young man who caught a good tailwind in life and made it big by harnessing his talents, a relentless dreamer who actually got to make his dreams come true. The Narrator's lines in the "Prologue" ("But all that I say / Can be told another way / In the story of a boy / Whose dream came true / And he could be you") certainly suggest to some listeners that Joseph is about our ability to make our dreams come true. And Joseph himself seems to put it best in Act Two: "Anyone from anywhere can make it if they get a lucky break!" To some extent, it *is* about that. But, funnily enough, I found that the show *does* have deeper layers that aren't immediately evident to the audience, and since I feel there's nothing wrong with theater that makes the audience think long after the show's over, I have no problem exposing some of those layers to critical examination.

There's one message in the show that the audience doesn't immediately pick up on, best exemplified by another couplet of the Narrator's from the "Prologue": "We all dream a lot / Some are lucky, some are not..." In just a pair of lines, everything the average person needs to know about the Bible's view of life is summed up. Whatever else one can say about the Bible<sup>2</sup>, it's unflinching, in that it commits to a view of the world as it is (or was), not how one would like it to be, and it ain't pretty. Sometimes, as can occur in some real-life circumstances, the Bible asks you to root for someone who, though they're in the right, is a total asshole.

Let's consider the title character. When you stop to *really* think about him, Joseph's conceited, a spoiled brat born with a silver spoon in his mouth, who doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks of him. How many of you would put up with a sibling your parent overly favors, to the point of lavishing expensive gifts on them? Someone who thinks he's the greatest person in the room and without him you're nothing, *and* has the nerve to rub it in your face? I'd fling the little bastard in the pit without a second thought. It can be argued that he grows up during Act II, but it's not like he behaves any less like a sociopath along the way – look how he cons Pharaoh into putting him in charge of crop-rationing. And what's he up to making Benjamin look like a criminal? Isn't that as bad as anything the brothers do to him?

"Some are lucky, some are not..." Well, I don't think I'll ever be prepared to forgive Joseph for being so lucky, especially when others are *rarely* that lucky. And yet we, lucky and unlucky alike, are expected to sympathize with him! What can we learn from *him*? Well, what productions cut from the same positive cloth seem to get right is the "relentless dreamer" part. For all his flaws, even when things are going *really* badly,

---

<sup>2</sup> Being an atheist, I have more of a "take it or leave it" attitude to anything related to the existence of God and so forth.

Joseph never gives up hope. His dreams of something better keep him going. They help him to survive, and to grow; after all, in the end, he's big enough to forgive his brothers.

Ara Pro Concreta

### III. VISION

#### *Guiding Theme*

The biggest problem with *Joseph* as it now stands is style. Though unconfirmed by any factual knowledge on my part, it's my belief that Webber thought he had to ramp up then-current productions of his earlier work to match the monolithic effect his Eighties mega-musicals had on the theater landscape, not always to the betterment of the shows in question, and that's part of the problem with a lot of newer *Joseph* productions. So I'd tackle this at all phases of development: strip off the veneer and see what's left underneath.

#### *The Venue*

My production of *Joseph* would require a "black box" space – simple, somewhat unadorned. If we get as close to the actual strict-definition "large square room with black walls and flat floor" aesthetic as we can, so much the better. Almost any large room can be transformed into one, which assures portability of the production if it's successful, and the costs will be minimal, which would appeal to low-income groups interested in my approach.

#### *Dramaturgy*

I made the point earlier that I felt newer productions of *Joseph* play up the laughs and production values at the expense of the show's "heart." This also extends to the text. Some choices were made that I don't feel were completely thought through, but they can be corrected with a keen eye focused on story above all.

One choice in particular that's always bothered me is placing "Any Dream Will Do" after the prologue. It doesn't belong there. The lyrics reflect *Joseph* more at the end of his story than the beginning, and it seems to have been plugged in at the top mainly to promote Jason Donovan's pop single version released in tandem with the Nineties revival. Unless the show's played as a flashback, which makes no sense since the story already started with the prologue, it has no place there. I'm not the only one to notice; some recent revivals – such as the U.S. national tour which opened with Ace Young and Diana DeGarmo in the lead roles – went so far as to remove it completely.

I'm not a fan of drastic measures, personally; I think the song can be rehabilitated without total excision, and in fact there are two ways to fix the incongruity of it appearing up-front. Besides, there are some realities a director can't dismiss, and one of them is that a licensed show, especially one by Andrew Lloyd Webber, can't be changed without the rights holders' permission.

For starters, it shouldn't be treated like a star's big showcase moment. Throw out the over-produced, self-confident arrangement, and leave the song stripped bare, with its naïveté intact: just *Joseph's* voice, and a ukulele backing.<sup>3</sup> It's not a huge change, but

---

<sup>3</sup> Examples of the feel I'm going for include "Blue, Red and Grey" by The Who, and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow / Wonderful World" by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.

the sound would be simpler and more in tune with who Joseph is when the show begins.

Secondly, and most obviously, the lyrics need a rewrite so they don't stick out like a sore thumb at the beginning. Luckily, Tim Rice has already unwittingly provided one.

As he tells it in the book *1000 UK #1 Hits* by Jon Kutner and Spencer Leigh, he and Andrew initially wrote "Any Dream Will Do" for the show without being any the wiser that the song had hit potential; it was just a show song that they wrote for the initial studio album.<sup>4</sup> About the middle of 1969, when the song hadn't gone anywhere (to their knowledge at least), they grabbed a boy named Christopher from the school choir that initially performed *Joseph* and cut a single version that promptly went nowhere. In a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment, Tim said, "I changed the lyrics; not completely, but I took out the references to 'colored coats' (*sic*) and anything to do with Joseph. This was silly because that was the appeal of the song. [...] It wasn't until the Jason Donovan production in 1991 that it became a big bona fide hit single."

Those lyrics read as follows:

*When evening falls  
I draw the curtain  
I know for certain  
What I want to do  
Do not disturb  
If I am weeping  
While I am sleeping  
Any dream will do*

*My dreams are clouds  
With golden lining  
Bright colors shining  
Wonderful and new  
I drift away  
Where the world can't find me  
Leave it all behind me  
Any dream will do*

*A crash of drums  
A flash of light  
My golden dreams  
Flew out of sight  
The colors faded into darkness  
I was left alone*

*May I return  
To the beginning*

---

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the song went to #1 in Ireland and Australia soon after the show was written must not have been a big enough clue.

*The light is dimming  
 And the dream is too  
 And it's because  
 Each time I wake up  
 My world just breaks up  
 Any dream will do*

Now, are they the *best* lyrics? No, the show-closing version is infinitely superior. This reads like something Tim wrote hastily on the way to Andrew's place after having promised he'd already completed a lyric. But pair the words with the arrangement I've just described in your head, dear reader, and put it at the top of the show.

Suddenly the pieces slide into place; the actor looking for their motivation has a clear path to follow. And, as the audience, we can follow the character's arc, as he grows from a happy-go-lucky bratty young kid who just wants to be left alone to dream and doesn't want any responsibility (because he's never been bred to know what that is), to a young man who takes on one massive responsibility after another in Egypt, and finds himself in control of his – and, ultimately, his family's – destiny. *These* are the lyrics that belong at the start of the journey the show suggests for Joseph's character. Now he has a place to go, and so do we.

### *Music and Lyrics*

Having already covered the one major rewrite and re-arrangement I'd like to include, one would think that's only the prelude to a massive list. Not so; all that's left to say on this count is to weigh in on a general note about the sound of the show's music.

The Nineties version (until recently licensed as "1993 UK tour w/ optional Megamix") is the one everybody now remembers, and the only one many people would accept. If one tried to veer too far from that, it probably wouldn't go down well with the audience. (Indeed, I still recall Theatre by the Sea massaging the score they received, which reflected the pre-revival edition and most closely resembled the 1974 studio recording with Gary Bond and Peter Reeves, into something resembling the Nineties version long before the actual materials necessary to perform it were ever licensed.)

However, in the transition to a more modern "pop" performance style, some of the show's original flavor was lost, particularly in terms of rhythm and harmonies. With a smaller cast almost necessitating this (*more about that momentarily*), I'd go back to the source and see what could be reincorporated from the original without sacrificing too much of what people know and love best about the established rendition.

### *Casting*

*Joseph*, in most current productions (local or professional), always has a "cast of thousands" effect without aiming for it, between the standard-sized Broadway caliber cast and the local children's choir drafted to be part of the mix and allow greater



ensemble participation.<sup>5</sup> I, on the other hand, have an idea that honors the connection to its origins as a piece for child performers while not filling the stage with unnecessary bodies. It goes without saying that youth should be a key component in casting, partly because of youthful performers' natural energy and vitality, and partly because it reflects the reality of "'way, way back many centuries ago, not long after the Bible began' in the land of Canaan and Egypt," as the show's setting is described in licensed materials, but there's a little more strategy involved this time around.

First, stripping down the size of the cast, we arrive at fourteen people, listed below in order of appearance (an asterisk signifies that the performer so marked doubles as ensemble in scenes where they are not needed as a lead):

- NARRATOR
- JOSEPH
- JACOB / POTIPHAR
- MRS. POTIPHAR\*
- BUTLER\*
- BAKER\*
- PHARAOH\*
- BROTHERS / ENSEMBLE

In short, we have one Narrator, one Joseph, one Jacob / Potiphar, and eleven brothers who double as secondary leads and literally everything else. Three of the brothers each lead one of the brother songs ("One More Angel in Heaven," "Those Canaan Days," and "Benjamin Calypso"), as per tradition; three more double as Pharaoh, the Butler, and the Baker. One is a female alto on the tall side who blends in with the others by attaching a beard and singing the top tenor part, and doubles as Mrs. Potiphar; another is a petite female soprano who sings the "Ah" in "One More Angel..." and plays Benjamin as a "pants" role. And all of those who don't play featured roles in scenes involving Potiphar, Joseph's jail time, or Pharaoh double as general chorus / ensemble.

Jacob is a nice cameo for an older (local, in a smaller production) celebrity who reads as "fatherly." The role was – to my knowledge – first doubled with Potiphar in the Nineties, and I see no reason to quibble with what works; it makes dramaturgical sense for the same actor to portray the "good daddy" who lavishes Joseph with gifts, mourns his loss, and is overjoyed to clasp his child to him once again at show's end, and the "bad daddy" who values Joseph but values his wife-slash-possession more and sends Joseph to prison. It illustrates one of the show's many morals: in life, some people will support you through everything, and some will only support you until you cross them, and it takes wisdom and experience to know the difference.

It'd be irresponsible to cast Joseph or the Narrator younger than the 17 to 25 range, given the vocal and physical demands of the parts (especially the latter). They should

---

<sup>5</sup> In his director's note for the Theatre by the Sea production, Lennie Watts admitted to initially being thrilled at getting the chance to work with a cast of more than 10, and then discovering he'd signed up for the largest ever TBTS production, with a cast of 45 – 19 adults, 26 children, and a [fake] camel. Clutter up the landscape much?

be young enough for the adult half of the audience to identify with their idealism, and old enough for the child half to take seriously when teaching them a lesson.

That leaves the ensemble. I want the brothers / ensemble to be played by a talented mix of children, both male and female. This was written for children, is best performed by children (*Joseph* has always been popular at schools), and for some reason it seems less "Sunday school as theater" when it's performed *by* the Sunday school as theater, and played straight to boot. Children, especially "theater children" trying their hardest, create more genuine comedy and drama than older performers relying on gimmicks for the former and tricks of the trade for the latter, just by being earnest kids.

### *General Staging and Design Ideas*

As I have a "black box" space in mind, my taste in terms of production design is similarly minimalist, although the set wouldn't be "theatrical" in the sense of, say, *The Fantasticks* or *The Threepenny Opera*. Any set pieces are realistically rendered (i.e., the Pharaoh has a dais with a throne, Jacob's camp has a tent, Mrs. Potiphar gets a gilded "slut" couch), but they're simple in that they serve the purpose of representing the scene without the benefit of a full set.

When it comes to staging *Joseph*, my ideas aren't particularly revolutionary either. The bulk of the show would play out pretty much as normal, albeit with slightly less of the added shtick that's filled productions over the years, except for one overarching framework that ties the whole thing together and reminds us it's a story for kids.

The show would open with a couple in their early twenties in their new baby's nursery. She sits in a glider cuddling the baby as she looks on. Together, they sing the "Prologue" as a prayer of hope for their child and its dreams.<sup>6</sup> As the lyrics suggest, this little prayer then turns into a bedtime story. At a certain point in the above number, the husband has (sight unseen) quick-changed into the role of Joseph. With the help of a ukulele, he establishes his character by singing the '69 "Any Dream Will Do" while his wife provides the echo part. This illustrates the pitfalls of relying *only* on one's dreams to get through life, and sets up the story to follow.

During the fanfare that precedes "Jacob and Sons," the lights would fade to black except for a spot on the mother putting her baby in its crib. She would begin to tell the story of Joseph and his brothers, as the lights come back up and we find ourselves in Canaan in the age of the patriarchs (the crib with the baby would eventually be struck). After that point, we'd pretty much forget about this conceit... until the lights fade after Joseph is reunited with his brothers.

The Narrator is once again in a lone spotlight by her baby's crib, finishing the story with "Jacob in Egypt." Her husband returns, no longer Joseph but in his original show-opening neutral costume. As he reprises "Any Dream Will Do" with his wife singing backup once again, he takes down his hair and wipes off his Egyptian make-up; the

---

<sup>6</sup> This, incidentally, is a nice nod to how the Narrator used to be played by a man before the original Broadway production in 1982 cast Laurie Beechman and realized the best way to solve the paucity of female leads was to cast it with a female belter from then on.

story is over. As husband and wife sing the "Give me my colored coat..." refrain, they lift the baby from the crib and return to their original positions by the glider. The baby is now wrapped in a blanket resembling the coat of many colors.

That's as heart-warming as I get. And for this show, it's definitely worth it.

Ara Pro Concreta