



Alanis Morissette's  
*Jagged  
Little Pill*

Everything “You Oughta Know”  
about the new Broadway Musical

BY IRIS WIENER

ALANIS MORISSETTE  
PHOTO BY MATTHEW MURPHY

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hen Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* dropped in 1995, critics described it as "raw," "edgy," "distinct" and "feminist." No matter how they felt about the album, they ultimately agreed that it was unique. The world followed suit, and Morissette's first nationwide album topped the chart in thirteen countries with sales of over 33 million copies worldwide. *Pill* went on to win five Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year. Despite its massive success, no one would have predicted that 24 years later Morissette's music would lay the groundwork for a Broadway musical.

"The guiding soul of this project from the get go was that iconic album, the holy grail," says Diane Paulus (*Hair, Waitress*), the director of the new musical, *Jagged Little Pill*, who recalls first listening to the album with Tom Kitt (the music supervisor, orchestrator and arranger), followed by a discussion about what they had heard and how it made them feel. When book writer Diablo Cody came on board, there was more dialogue about what they visualized as they heard the iconic songs. Soon, Morissette herself got involved. "Really hearing from Alanis as to what was important about the music led to larger issues about her philosophy and relational healing, and the way she thinks about psychology. All of the themes in the show ended up coming from the music. Her songs go on journeys. Her music didn't resist this exercise, it opened doors," adds Paulus.

"This process, and what this process has yielded artistically and collaboratively, has been nothing short of a revelation, a balm and an arrival for me," says Morissette. "It is a culmination of so much of what my life's work has been oriented toward."

Cody, an Academy Award winner who is best known for her acclaimed screenplays, (*Juno, Young Adult*) and for creating the

Emmy Award winning series *United States of Tara* with Steven Spielberg, found herself in uncharted territory with *Pill*.

"I was completely new to theater," Cody says. "I've never so much as written a play before, let alone the book for a musical that could potentially head to Broadway, so it was daunting. I was really nervous and I knew that I had a lot to learn. I was operating out of my comfort zone. I thought I would be so limited in terms of what I could write, especially when I imagined that there were no special effects and that everything would happen on stage in one take. I thought there would be a lot

metaphorically, the world," says Paulus. "The world is burning and the mom is just trying to write the perfect letter. When Diablo finished her pitch I immediately said, 'I get it, I'm in. I know how to do the show.'"

"Diablo Cody's heart is as open as her mind is bright and brave [and she] has taken this record – which has meant so much to me – to a whole other level of depth, meaning and natural activism," says Morissette, who describes Cody's voice as "fierce, sensitive and hilarious." "[She touches] on topics that keep me up at night for how deeply I care about them."



of things that I'd want to see but wouldn't be able to execute. It turned out to be the exact opposite."

Paulus says that she will never forget Cody's concerns when it came to writing the book. "Diablo went away and came up with a proposal of how this would land in a narrative," says Paulus. "She came back saying, 'I know how I would write this as a film...' I said, 'So, just do that and pitch it to me like you would pitch a film. Don't worry about it being a musical and it having to follow different rules.'"

Cody began describing the idea of a family and the relationships within it, beginning with a mother writing a Christmas letter, "trying to hold onto all of the appearances of everything being perfect, but really everything is falling apart around her, including,

*Jagged Little Pill* is no ordinary jukebox musical; in fact, Paulus says their mission was to break the mold of the average jukebox musical, noting that it even includes two new songs that Morissette specifically wrote for the show, which is ultimately about a family that begins to show the cracks beneath the surface of their seemingly perfect state. The show includes themes of addiction, identity, politics and assault. "I think we were trying to find ways to build a story where the songs come right out of the characters. Because of the way [Cody] has written this, there are moments where I think, 'Oh my god. That song was written for that character!' The songs just fall out of the characters' mouths in a seamless way, and they were written yesterday for this moment," says Paulus.

THE COMPANY OF *JAGGED LITTLE PILL* AT AMERICAN REPERTORY THEATER IN 2018  
PHOTO BY EVGENIA ELISEEVA



path to the show that would premiere at Cambridge's American Repertory Theater in 2018. "I knew that Mary Jane would be the lead character in the show," says Cody. "I don't know if there are a lot of albums that speak to you like that. A song like 'Hand in My Pocket' is about the human condition. Not a lot of pop songs are about that. Most are about the same three subjects: love, unrequited love, and being okay." The songs on the album even spoke to Cody about how they should function in the show. "One of the few things I knew about musicals is that you have to have an 'I Want' song in the first act," she says. "The

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Once Cody sunk her teeth into the project, she found that the album *Jagged Little Pill* was theatrical by nature. "It is a concept album in a lot of ways and the songs are really profound," Cody says. "They're deep, they're about real stuff, they follow a narrative arc, and they have characters in them. They almost feel like they were written to be adapted for the stage." Cody knew she had chosen a project that was right for her, as she never felt the need to force songs into certain moments. "The process was much more organic than I thought it was going to be," she says, remembering her unease over the thought

THE CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM OF *JAGGED LITTLE PILL*  
PHOTO BY NATHAN JOHNSON



of having to re-write lyrics. "I thought it was the only way [the lyrics] would fit with the specific, unique story that I was planning to create about this dysfunctional family." In the end, the team barely changed any words. "That's how organic it was," she says, laughing. "I'm thrilled, I really did not think it was going to unfold the way that it did."

It was "Mary Jane" (a song in which Morissette is reassuring a friend who is having a rough time), that set Cody on the

song 'All I Really Want' spells it out. That couldn't have been easier for me."

"I kept saying the music feels epic and intuitive; it's like a Greek chorus," says Paulus, who remembers Morissette being intrigued by this idea. "We started to ask, 'Who is this chorus? Who is the conscience of this show? How does a Greek chorus function? How are they the conscience of the characters? How did they know things that the characters don't know?'

They became the psyches of the characters.”

Cody wrote the show giving the integral 11 o'clock number, “You Oughta Know,” to a supporting female character. When *Pill* ran at Cambridge the hit was known to steal the show to the point that Paulus changed lighting cues to try to shorten the audience’s lengthy, exuberant reactions. “It’s interesting because we were far into the process when it occurred to me that that’s pretty unusual,” says Cody. “The character, Jo, functions as a comic relief, the best friend with the witty asides. So you think you’re seeing something familiar, but in reality those witty asides are masking a great deal of pain that is bubbling underneath the entire show until it explodes. I try to take traditional supporting character roles and turn them on their side, making them more meaningful.”

Paulus, Cody and Morisette wanted a show that, above all else, spoke to the human condition and reminds people that they’re all in this world together. When *Pill* opened in 2018, Cody remembers the team hoping they could get to Broadway faster as the show touched on movements such as stands against gun violence – topics they assumed would lose relevance in years to come. “Then we realized, sadly, that it was all still going to be significant when we got to Broadway. I feel like the #MeToo conversation rages on, and the issue of gun violence is still in there, albeit in a different way.”

Cody embraces the fact that a few early viewers felt the show dealt with too many topics. “When I heard that I said, ‘Yeah, and we’re going to keep doing that. We’re going to double down. This is what we are. I’m not going to pretend this show is light entertainment. I think there are some people who think that it is a show about Alanis Morisette, and that it might be poppy and fun.’ Though *Pill* does have some “poppy” moments, it is not an accurate description of the experience one can expect at the show.

“It’s really a story about how all of us are susceptible to this practice where we try to bury our problems, deny them, close our eyes and stick our heads in the sand like ostriches,” adds Cody. “I was like that for



a very long time, even just in terms of the political situation. I used to be almost proud of how apathetic I was about the things that were happening in the world, and I can’t do that anymore. That’s a universal thing.”

“We’re all connected and we are all a part of the universe we’re living in,” says Paulus of the underlying impetus for the show. “We’re all complicit in what’s happening in the world today. I have learned from Alanis over the last couple of years that there’s no way to heal in isolation, and that we have to do it in the presence of other people and in relation to each other. That’s what goes on in the show and that’s not always easy.”

Perhaps some of the show’s incisive depth can be credited to the rarity of having three women at its helm. Though the creative team is also comprised of Kitt and choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (both men), Paulus and Cody recognize how the female dynamic was influential on the creation of *Pill*.

“It was definitely a big moment in the process when it was Diablo, Alanis and me talking to each other, because we’re not only women but three mothers with kids,” says Paulus, who notes that Morisette wrote the music when she was 19 years old. “That’s when the depth of the musical went to it not being about teenagers. I think because we were all coming to the album now, twenty plus years later, it was so interesting that the three of us were going, ‘Okay, what does this album mean to us now as women who are not teenagers anymore, women who are dealing with

family and relationships?’”

“Women bring a certain energy to a project, especially someone like Alanis, who is deeply empathetic and extremely interested in human behavior and is not driven by money or by a desire for fame,” adds Cody. “Alanis is a seeker for truth. So being welcomed with Diane and Tom Kitt, we were really able to dig deep into the characters in a way that did feel connected with the sacred feminine. I felt like our way of approaching the story was very rounded and spiritual. That’s what you get with Alanis Morisette.” Morisette agrees, adding that the process of creating the show was “tinged with giddiness, terror, surrender, wild passion, joy and light.”

Cody hopes that *Pill* audiences take away a similar energy and that they come away from the show having had a meaningful experience. “I want people to forgive themselves and other people, and to be kinder to themselves and other people,” she says, emphatically. “I want people to realize that they’re not alone, and that there are many people out there projecting an image of perfection [through social media] and it’s meaningless. These curated bios we see online are not reality. If people take that with them I will have done my job.” \*

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Iris Wiener is an entertainment writer and theater critic. Visit her at [IrisWiener.com](http://IrisWiener.com) or on Twitter @Iris\_Wiener.

