

ON STAGE AT LIVE ARTS **JULY 14-30**



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HEATHERS

The Musical

BOOK, MUSIC, & LYRICS BY
**KEVIN MURPHY &
LAURENCE O'KEEFE**

DIRECTED BY **DANIEL KUNKEL**
MUSICAL DIRECTION BY **ABBY SMITH**
CHOREOGRAPHY BY **ANNE TALKINGTON**
BASED ON THE FILM BY DANIEL WATERS

TICKETS & INFO
LIVEARTS.ORG

STUDY GUIDE



HEATHERS: THE MUSICAL (Teen Edition)

by Laurence O’Keefe and Kevin Murphy

July 14-30, 2023 in the Gibson Theater

Directed by Daniel Kunkel

Musical Direction by Abby Smith

Choreography by Anne Talkington

The play runs for approximately 2 hours with a 15 minute intermission.

“The rowdy matinee crowd with which I saw the show hooted as gleefully as little Bart and Lisa do when they watch gore-filled “Itchy and Scratchy” cartoons on “The Simpsons.”

– *The New York Times*

“The score manages a couple of stirring numbers, chiefly the yearning ballad *Seventeen*. And if *Freeze Your Brain* will never become a cabaret standard, a paean to the Slushie certainly has novelty value.” – *The Hollywood Reporter*

“‘Heathers’ is a nostalgia trip with a decidedly more hopeful slant than its source material ... You were expecting something pitch black and morbid in a musical about suicide, school shootings and hidden bombs? So what—’did you have a brain tumor for breakfast?’” – NBC New York

Study Guide compiled for Live Arts Education Intern Karlis Povisils





Rehearsal photo by Austin Lam featuring the ensemble of HEATHERS: Teen Edition.





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HEATHERS

The Musical

Plot Summary

Based on the cult classic film of the same name, HEATHERS is the story of Veronica Sawyer, a senior at the fictional Westerberg High. Veronica longs to be cool like the clique of it-girls that runs Westerberg: the unaffected, unattainable Heathers. Unfortunately, in addition to awesome levels of popularity, the Heathers are also cruel, choosing to mock and bully their kingdom into submission. When Veronica uses her skills as a forger to get the Heathers out of detention, she impresses their leader Heather Chandler— so much so that they agree to let her into their exclusive club. At first Veronica is thrilled—until she finds out that being one of the Heathers means bullying the same kids she used to call friends. Meanwhile, Veronica finds herself attracted to a mysterious newcomer at school named Jason Dean (JD). When an innocent drink mixup results in the accidental poisoning of Heather Chandler, JD convinces Veronica to stage Heather’s suicide. The results are so successful that Veronica and JD, exhilarated with their newfound power, resolve to rid Westerberg of the cruelly popular elite forever.

Time & Setting

Location: Sherwood, Ohio

Time: 1989



Content Advisory

HEATHERS THE MUSICAL contains discussions of dark issues and adult themes, including suicide, swearing, bullying, teen drinking, gun violence, murder, bulimia, drug use, fat-shaming, and homophobia. HEATHERS is a dark comedy and exists to combat its own subject matter.

Characters

- **VERONICA SAWYER**- The protagonist. Burns to be both cool and kind, but doesn't yet know how to be both at the same time. Fierce sense of right and wrong, keen sense of ironic humor. Thinks she's an old soul, but she's still innocent enough to be blindsided by love or shocked by cruelty.
- **JASON "J.D." DEAN**- Darkly charismatic, compelling, attractive. Charming on the outside, damaged on the inside with his keen smarts, savage wit.
- **HEATHER CHANDLER**- The richest, hottest, cruelest girl in town. Relishes power and wields it without fear, patience, or mercy.
- **HEATHER MCNAMARA**- Beautiful, innocent, stupid. Can be mean on command if Heather Chandler orders it, but actually quite vulnerable and fearful.
- **HEATHER DUKE**- The whipped beta dog of the three Heathers. Deeply insecure. When she finally becomes Queen Bee, she wields power like a bulldozer.
- **MARTHA DUNNSTOCK**- Veronica's friend since childhood. Nicknamed "Martha Dumptruck," the opposite of confident and popular. Huge and beautiful soul, optimistic even in the face of rejection.
- **RAM SWEENEY**- Linebacker for Westerberg High. Big, insensitive to the feelings of others, ruled by appetites.
- **KURT KELLY**- Quarterback and captain for Westerberg High. Chiseled, rude, entitled, cocky. He's the brains in the friendship with Ram.
- **RAM'S DAD**- Former football player turned suburban dad, has never outgrown his high school glory days. Hates weakness, but capable of soul-searching when tragedy strikes.
- **BIG BUD DEAN**- J.D.'s single dad and famous building demolition company owner. Big jolly personality that barely conceals the enormous rage bubbling just below the surface. Quite possibly a serial bomber.
- **COACH RIPPER**- Stalwart, man's man; quick to defend his players.





- **MS. FLEMING-** Aging hippie teacher, still yearning for the day the Age of Aquarius reaches Ohio. Resentful of today's entitled youth, protective of the underdogs. Despite a penchant for self-promotion, genuinely cares about the students in her charge.
- **VERONICA'S MOM-** Easygoing, distant, yet capable of laying down the law.
- **KURT'S DAD-** Straight-laced, very conservative, also former football player. A simple guy, not book smart, you'd be happy to share a beer with him.
- **VERONICA'S DAD-** Easygoing and distant.
- **PRINCIPAL GOWAN-** Rumpled, burned out, hates conflict.



Rehearsal photo by Austin Lam featuring Nik Scott and Sophia Christensen.





About the Playwrights

Laurence O’Keefe is a composer and lyricist. He graduated Harvard and pursued composition and film scoring at Berklee College of Music and the University of Southern California. He is best known for composing for media that were adapted into stage musicals. Examples include *Bat Boy: The Musical* (1997), *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (2002), and *Legally Blonde: The Musical* (2007). Additionally, he has worked on a variety of tracks for TV shows such as *The Daily Show*, *Johnny and The Sprites*, and *Julie’s Green Room* to name a few. He is an active drama teacher at several colleges such as Harvard as well as an advocate for various theater communities across New York and especially Broadway.



Photo of Laurence Keefe advertising a revamp his off-Broadway show "Bat-Boy: The Musical" for Harvard University (Photo taken by David Gordon)



Portrait of Kevin Murphy, co-writer of "Heathers the Musical," outside of New World Stages in New York

Kevin Murphy is a screenwriter, television producer, lyricist and composer. He graduated from Drew University with honors in Theater Arts. Beginning his writing career with the series *Big Brother Jake* (1990-94), he broke into writing for many TV series such as *Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog* (1993), *Sabrina: The Animated Series* (1999), *Weird Science* (1994-97), *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids: The TV Show* (1997-2000), and *Get Real* (1999-2000). However, he is best known for being the writer for the first three seasons of *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), which won an Emmy award in 2005. For the stage, Murphy notably wrote and lyricized *Reefer Madness* (1998).





Performance History

Heathers: The Musical was first presented as a concert in 2010 at Joe’s Pub (Part of The Public Theater in New York City). The show was then played in limited engagement at the Hudson Backstage Theater in Los Angeles from September 21 to October 6, 2013. *Heathers: The Musical* was brought to Off-Broadway at New World Stages on March 15, 2014. Ever since then, the show has been produced around the globe.



*A scene from the musical HEATHERS, performing at New World Stages in New York.
Photo taken by Chad Batka/AP.*





About the Artistic Team

Director **Daniel Kunkel** (he/him) is a director, writer, stage combatant, and podcaster. He has taught theater in person and remotely in New York City, Virginia, Oregon, and Ohio, and has been producing and developing plays, podcasts, and videos since 2016. Daniel is currently pursuing his Masters of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Musical Director **Abby Smith** (she/her) is the choir director at Henley Middle School and Western Albemarle High School and also teaches private instrumental lessons at the Music Education Center. She has been a part of Live Arts for the past five years, including counseling/instructing various summer camps and playing in the pit orchestra for previous shows including CRYBABY, RENT, and IN THE HEIGHTS.

Choreographer **Anne Talkington** (she/her) trained with the North Carolina State Ballet performing roles such as Clara in *The Nutcracker*, Four Little Swans in *Swan Lake*, and Fairy of Eloquence in *Sleeping Beauty*. She attended the Carolina Ballet's intensive program and studied at the Duke University Dance Program. Other credits include Ira David Wood III's *A Christmas Carol* (Theatre in the Park); *Merry Wives of Windsor* (Sweet Tea Shakespeare); modeling for the Durham Dances book project; and Dance Captain for *Something Rotten!* at the Wayne Theatre. Her choreography has appeared in productions by the Duke University Dance Program and SITA Film Productions.

Having "BIG FUN" with HEATHERS: An Interview With Director Daniel Kunkel

The interview below was conducted on Tuesday, June 27, 2023. Live Arts Education Intern Karlis Povisils chats with Daniel Kunkel, Director of HEATHERS: Teen Edition. Interview edited by Ti Ames.

Karlis: Why was this show chosen?





Daniel: I can't speak for Susan and the rest of the staff, but in my conversations with them, I think one of the reasons this show was chosen is it is still very resonant with younger people. I think there are a lot of themes in it that are kind of always going to be common for younger people like bullying and acceptance and kind of figuring out who you are. And I think this show explores it in a way that a lot of other musicals don't. I think it's very unashamed and kind of unafraid to kind of show how rough things can actually be in a high school.

Karlis: What was your vision for this show in regards to the art direction?

Daniel: In regards to the direction we talked a lot. For me, what jumps out about the show is how almost divine the Heathers are put up to be at the beginning of the show. So talking to designers, we talked about how we can make it feel like they are these gods among these other classmates, and how can we, throughout the show, show them kind of falling back down to earth a little bit? And part of that's in the script, it's baked in... The Heathers need to move very purposely. They don't have a lot of superfluous movements. Their actions are very purposeful, at least in Act One.

... From a design perspective, we've got these large, beautiful silhouettes of them literally hovering over the entire set, looking down on everyone.

Karlis: Tell me about a task (or multiple) that went better than what you expected, whether it was from an actor, crew member, prop designer, etc?

Daniel: Darryl is absolutely phenomenal as a props designer and creator, just absolutely phenomenal. ... This last week, we've been working more closely with Etta, our scenic designer—they've been watching rehearsals and, and we've been able to have more active conversations in the room, seeing things. We've actually come up with a whole new idea for a piece of scenery that in the beginning is just this multipurpose table. As we were talking and I said, "It doesn't really serve a purpose in Act Two." And they responded, "Well, what if it's the shrine to the kids who die?" And we started really cooking and moving forward with that and changing it from this multipurpose object to this piece of scenery that serves a purpose—to constantly remind you of the fact that people are dead. They no longer are here even though we see them as ghosts, and that to me has been so exciting to see that develop these last few days.





Karlis: What is your favorite part of the show to work on or just your favorite part in general?

Daniel: My favorite part of the show to work on... There are lots of small moments that have been very fun to work on. It's been nice working with our JD and our Veronica, and we've had our swings very involved in that process as well, letting them build their own versions of scenes. So yes, blocking will be very similar, but their motivations might be different, specific moves they make are different, and letting them feel like it is their performance as well. Not just because they have a guaranteed performance, but because if they need to step up, I don't want them to feel like they have to step into somebody else's shoes. I want them to feel like their own thing. So the audience is getting a different performance.



Rehearsal photo by Austin Lam featuring the cast of HEATHERS: Teen Edition.

Karlis: Have you learned any valuable lessons about directing or otherwise from working on this show?





Daniel: I think the most valuable lesson I have learned is it is important to always remember that people are coming at this with different experiences and different skills. You come in very conscious of that, and then you start working. We've got a very wide age range of people.

Karlis: How big of a range?

Daniel: (Ages) 14 to 20. We've got a cast member who's 14 and we have many cast members who are 20 ... Something we've been talking about a lot is that ... ensemble building (is) not necessarily (about the fact) that you can sing very loud or do very complicated choreography. It's that each of you has a different thing you're good at, just like all of us do. And learning to use your strengths to help other people ... and let other people's strengths help you. So we've got some people who are just better dancers (and I say that as someone who is a terrible dancer). We've got some people who have a much better sense of where they need to go on and off stage. And so (you're) constantly reminding yourself that you want to use those skills. You don't want to come in with too rigid of a vision that you can't let people express themselves within that.

We've done a little bit of character work, but I really wanted them to kind of go wild and bring themselves into these students, because that is so close to them, and it's been very fun watching these characters who in the script appear very small, but because of the way we've staged it, they are constantly on stage. A lot of people will have like, a five or six page break, and then they're back on stage, even if it's just hanging out on stage. So yeah, not coming with too rigid of a vision and letting people use their own strengths was something I learned.





A Teen Cult Classic: About the Movie *Heathers*



25 years before *Heathers: The Musical* hit Off-Broadway, the movie *Heathers* hit theaters in 1989 in a non-musical format. The film was written by Daniel Waters, directed by Michael Lehmann, and produced by Denise Di Novi, and distributed by New World Pictures. Cinematography was done by Francis Kelly and music came from David Newman. The film stars Winona Ryder, Christian Slater, Shannon Doherty, Lisanne Falk, Kim Walker, and Penelope Milford.

The Writing Process

Our story begins with Daniel Waters in 1986. At this point, Waters was new to film writing, only 24 years of age and currently working behind a desk at a video store. He knew that only an original, gripping story idea could land him a production team. He looked to Stanley Kubrik, one of his favorite directors. Kubrik took dark, epic, and cynical approaches to many of his works and had a movie from each genre with his own style: a war movie, a science fiction movie, a horror movie. However, what he did not have was a teen movie.

Waters was a fan of John Hughes' repertoire, which consists of many iconic teen movies. Many teen movies at the time presented high school students as innocent, and any bad behavior exhibited was blamed on the parents. This was



the one thing Waters was not on board with in John Hughes' films and he sought to do a





Dr. Strangelove-esque take on it. In his high school experience, he knew that teens were more masters of their own fate, and he was fascinated by high school drama (he even said he preferred high school over college for that reason). Another factor influencing Waters was the way teen suicide was presented in the media, essentially elevating these teens to a god-like level. He wanted to satirize that in his work.

The Director and Financing



When looking for a director for this project, Waters naturally wanted Stanley Kubrik, but that idea went nowhere. Instead, an agent who thought his script had potential directed him to up-and-coming director Michael Lehmann. Lehmann had previously worked at American Zoetrope, a film company owned by Francis Ford Coppola. At first, Waters was hesitant to work

with him, but they quickly bonded on their shared fascination with this project (even after Lehmann cut down the meager 197 pages of script Waters originally made).

New World Productions agreed to finance the film only if they changed the ending to make it less dark.

Casting

Casting was fairly tough for this movie due to the dark subject matter. Most notably, actress Heather Graham was offered the role of Heather Chandler, but had to turn it down because of her parents' disapproval of the script.

However, actors and actresses were eventually found who agreed to play these roles. For the role of Veronica, Waters originally wanted to cast Jennifer Connelly (most known for her role in *Labyrinth* at the time). When Winona Ryder was brought up as an option, Waters thought she was not quite right for the role. His mind was swiftly changed when he and Lehmann met her in person and she read Veronica's lines and





showed great enthusiasm in her script (despite her agent begging her not to take the role). This also solved one disagreement between the writer and director. Daniel Waters and Michael Lehmann disagreed on Veronica's complicity in her actions. Waters wanted her to be a more complicit *femme fatale*, but Lehmann wanted her to be a more unwilling collaborator and audience surrogate. Eventually, Waters sided with Lehmann's vision once they saw Ryder's performance. All of this happened before *Beetlejuice* hit theaters – *Heathers* was simply more evidence at the time that Winona Ryder had Hollywood potential.

Brad Pitt was originally planned to fill the role of JD, but plans changed after Christian Slater's audition. Slater thought he bombed his audition and threw away his script in frustration, but actually landed the role, much to his surprise. Slater famously channeled Jack Nicholson in his performance, which fit the vision for the character.



After Heather Graham ended up not taking the role of "Heather Chandler," it was then offered to Christian Slater's then girlfriend, Kim Walker.

Fun fact: The actors channeled aspects of their characters even off-camera. For example, Patrick Labyorteaux, who played Ram, acted "jocky" and sent inappropriate letters to the actresses who were playing the Heathers; Christian Slater almost exclusively hung out with Winona Ryder; and Ryder actually developed a crush on Slater because of their on-camera and off-camera chemistry.





Reception



Heathers was released at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1989 and in theaters in March. Unfortunately, *Heathers* bombed at the box office. The film cost \$3 million to make and only made \$1.1 million in its 5 weeks in theaters. At the time, New World Pictures was going bankrupt, and this only added to their problems.

Despite being a financial failure, the film quickly gained a cult following for its great performances; it has become one of the most-loved teen movies and dark comedies of all time, a sentiment that has only grown over time and helped forward the careers of Winona Ryder and Christian Slater.

One of the most timeless aspects of the movie is the dialogue. Instead of using slang of the time, they either used time-tested slang or came up with some of their own. To this day, *Heathers* is one of the most cited films in the Oxford English Dictionary. Examples include “hang” (to pass the time), “I’m sorry” (when asking to repeat words out of misunderstanding or disbelief of what was said), and “cow-tipping.”

After the film’s release, writer Daniel Waters and Winona Ryder did discuss a sequel to the film and came up with a bizarre tale of Veronica becoming a page for a US Senator named “Heather,” played by Meryl Streep, that eventually ends in Veronica killing the president (and having it be a good thing) with JD coming back as an Obi-Wan Kenobi-type force ghost. Waters did not take this idea too seriously, but Ryder asked Meryl Streep about this concept and got her on board, genuinely wanting to follow through with this idea. Unfortunately (or fortunately), no sequel has been made.

Differences Between the Movie and the Musical:

Aside from the industry standard differences between movies and stage musicals, such as adding song numbers and having an intermission, there are a few core differences between *Heathers* and *Heathers: The Musical*.





One of the main differences comes at the very beginning. While the film starts with Veronica already involved with the Heathers' clique but as an observer of their terrible treatment of other students, the musical begins with Veronica as an outsider and a loser and showing how she ends up getting inducted into the clique. For the movie, this makes the Heathers more hateable and Heather Chandler's fate more understandable. For the musical, we are more clearly shown the Heathers' impact on Veronica's life and what she would become if she renounced her affiliation with the Heathers.



However, the biggest difference between the two works is the role of "Martha Dunnstock" (or "Martha Dumptruck"). In the film, Martha is just one of the Heathers' unlucky targets due to being overweight. In the musical, Martha's role is combined with Betty Finn's from the film. Betty Finn was Veronica's unpopular long-time friend; in the musical that role is taken by Martha. Martha is also depicted as the kindergarten girlfriend of popular Westerberg quarterback Ram Sweeney, which makes the prank letter sting even more. Instead of the awful people at the party being Veronica's breaking point, it is instead the cruel prank the Heathers set up for Martha. Veronica's defense of the Dumptruck girl seals her fate with the Heathers.

Images are stills from the movie Heathers.

Talkback Information

The audience talkback with members of the cast and crew of **HEATHERS: THE MUSICAL (Teen Edition)** is scheduled for 4:15pm on Sunday, July 23rd, 2023, in Gibson Theater (123 E. Water Street, 2nd floor), facilitated by Education Director Ti Ames. You do not need to purchase a ticket to the July 23rd show to attend the talkback. This program is provided free of charge to the Charlottesville community. Please email ti@livearts.org with questions about the event.





Works Cited

[DANIEL WATERS ON 'HEATHERS' \(PART 1 OF 2\)](#)

[Heathers Filmgrab.com](#)

[Heathers the Musical, Based on the '80s Movie, Set for World Premiere in Los Angeles](#)

["What Is Your Damage?" Heathers: The Musical Gets Joe's Pub Concerts Sept. 13](#)



Rehearsal photo by Austin Lam featuring (L-R): Hope King, Korrine Brier, Violet Craghead-Way, and Sophia Christensen.

