

NINA MOINI: A beloved American novel about immigration and the Great Plains is getting new life on stage in Minneapolis. Theater Latté Da is premiering a musical adaptation of Willa Cather's classic novel *My Ántonia* at the Ritz Theater this week. The 1918 novel cemented writer Willa Cather as one of America's defining literary voices. It follows a lifelong friendship between first-generation immigrants on the Nebraska prairie. And more than a century later, the story still resonates across the Midwest for its portrayal of resilience and belonging.

Joining me now is Jessie Austrian, the show's director and one of the creators behind the adaptation. Thanks for being with us, Jessie.

JESSIE Thanks so much for having us. It's a pleasure to be here.

AUSTRIAN:

NINA MOINI: Pleasure to have you. Also really happy to have Kate Kilbane, who wrote the music for the production. Kate, thank you for being here, as well.

KATE KILBANE: Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

NINA MOINI: I hope that I was even able to scratch the surface of doing justice to just how cool it is that you all did this. I mean [INAUDIBLE]. *My Ántonia* is such a beloved piece of literature, and I wonder, Jessie, what made you think, OK, this could work as a musical?

JESSIE Yeah, it is a beloved piece of literature that personally, I had actually never read until with our four collaborators who came together to create this piece-- myself and Kate, and also, Noah Brody, and Dan Moses. And we were looking for a piece of source material to adapt into a musical, and we knew we wanted something that was an American story by an American author. We knew we wanted something that had a strong woman at its center.

AUSTRIAN:

And, Noah suggested, hey, let's read *My Ántonia*, or for him, reread *My Ántonia*. I had never read it. I think I was supposed to read it in high school, and I never did. And I'm sort of glad because I got the gift of receiving it as a fully-formed adult, and I might have missed the depth and the layers and the nuance in Willa Cather's writing in this book had I read it too soon, I think.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

JESSIE So, Noah suggested we think about it, and I read it, and I think, we all had a similar experience. I fell deeply in love with this story, with its characters, with Ántonia, its central character. But the thing that felt immediately wanted to be celebrated and uplifted and musicalized in this art form, this particularly American art form of musical theater that blends all these different genres and ways of telling story, is that at its core, this is a story about community. And there's a lot of literature from this period that upholds the myth of rugged individualism.

AUSTRIAN:

And what struck us immediately was how Cather is so beautifully and subtly using this novel to bust that myth about rugged individualism and shine her spotlight on the communities of immigrant women, who are allowing the whole economy to thrive, who are the engine behind what we now as the American Midwest economy gets built. And that felt like a story that we were really excited to figure out how to bring to the stage.

NINA MOINI: And then, Kate wrote a lot of the music and lyrics for the production. I wonder, where you begin with a process like that. Is it with tone? I mean, how do you even begin that process?

KATE KILBANE: It's a beautiful question. Yes, my creative partner and life partner, my husband, Dan Moses, and I wrote all the music and lyrics together. And when we start, I mean, the first thing we do actually is sit around the table, all four of us. And we're all such story-driven people that we're really interrogating the whole story. And we're asking ourselves the question, which of these moments do we think will be best served by song? What are the moments that we're going to want to hold in music?

And we actually built a bunch set lists, pretending this were going to be just a concert, and thinking about which moments could be songified. And then we would narrow in on one. For example, the moment in the novel where Jimmy Burton meets *Ántonia* for the first time when they are children. Jimmy's 10, and *Ántonia* is 13. And they become friends, and he teaches her English. And we thought, aha, that sounds like it could be a song.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

KATE KILBANE: So we begin with the story, and then we decide, that's the moment. And then we would talk, the four of us, about words and images or ideas that float up when we think about that moment. And then, Dan and I would go into our little writing hovels, each with a keyboard, and we tend to start songs quietly alone.

So one of us will maybe come up with a melody that feels relevant, or maybe one phrase of lyric that feels ripe and exciting, and bring it as an offering to the other one. And we sit the room together, making soup, and we just stir it slowly and add to the melody and add to the lyrics. And when we feel like we've got maybe even like 3/4 of an idea, then we play it for Jessie and Noah. And we say, this is what we're thinking, and we get their feedback and ideas, and the songs get built from there.

NINA MOINI: That is so cool. Thank you for sharing. I'm always curious about the process, and it's cool to that it's collaborative, but in the very beginning, do need a little bit of time on your own to get your own thoughts together. It's just like working in a team like that is fascinating to me.

Jessie, one of the things that you mentioned was just community and contribution of immigrants and women gathering and holding up economies. What conversations are you hoping the musical could open up right now? Lots of parallels.

JESSIE AUSTRIAN: I mean, I think, they are very evident and something we never could have predicted six years ago when we first started the beginnings of what became this musical, that's now having its world premiere here. We could never have predicted what it would feel like, the responsibility that it would feel like and the honor to get to tell this story that uplifts immigrant communities here in Minneapolis in 2026.

And I think that Minneapolis, as somebody who doesn't live here, but loves this community and has worked in this community a few times now, as somebody who resides elsewhere in these United States, I have watched the communities in the Twin Cities come together and be a model to my eyes of what it means to become a hero, to supporting your families and your neighbors, and to ultimately understand that we are all responsible and accountable to each other. And that is what community means. And so I feel this extreme honor to get to bring this show here at this particular moment and get feedback from audiences about how this is resonating.

And I think that *Ántonia's* story is one immigrant story. There are so many. There is no one American story. There's no one American immigrant story. This is one of many. But I hope that the audience walks away with a feeling and an appreciation for all of the ways that *Ántonia* embodies the various heroes that we all in our everyday lives, the heroes in our communities. The people who are quietly, tirelessly working for their family and their neighbors and keeping the whole community going.

And that I hope that people leave feeling inspired by this idea, which I believe is true, which is that as an individual, I may not feel like I have a lot of power, but when I'm part of a community, we can do a lot. We can do a lot with a little. And that is the content of this show at its heart and its core. And it's, also, the form of the production, which is an ensemble production, which, as Kate was just saying, is very much built by a group of collaborators and has been built and developed over time with an incredible community of Twin Cities artists that have developed the show with us.

NINA MOINI: Well, thank you, both, so much, congratulations on the premiere coming up this week, and I appreciate your time so much. Thank you.

JESSIE Thank you.

AUSTRIAN:

KATE KILBANE: Thanks for having us.

NINA MOINI: That was Jessie Austrian, Director and Co-Creator of Theater Latté Da, new musical adaptation of *My Ántonia*, along with composer and lyricist Kate Kilbane. The show premieres Wednesday, June 3 and runs through July 12 at the Ritz Theater in northeast Minneapolis.