

{weekend preview}

# Remember, remember the fifth of November

BY DANA GAVIN | WEEKEND@THEHUDSONVALLEYNEWS.COM



'Bonfire' writer  
Justin Levine  
confers with director  
Alex Timbers. ©  
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## "Bonfire Night"

Book, music and lyrics

by Justin Levine

July 16-18

8 p.m. | Friday and Saturday

2 p.m. | Sunday

Martel Theater

Vassar College, 124 Raymond Ave.

845-437-7235 or 845-437-5599

The legend of Guy Fawkes has been turned into many things: a night of revelry, a historical romance, children's stories, penny dreadfuls and, perhaps most popularly, a ten-issue comic-book series written by Alan Moore and illustrated mostly by David Lloyd, set in a dystopian future United Kingdom imagined from the 1980s about the 1990s, titled "V for Vendetta," later made into a marginally successful movie starring Hugo Weaving and Natalie Portman in 2005.

The latest treatment is most intriguing, however, coming to audiences in the form

of a new musical written by Justin Levine, which will run in concert form as part of Vassar's Martel Musical series this weekend.

Directed by Obie winner Alex Timbers ("Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson"), "Bonfire Night" follows the true story of Fawkes and the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, only this time, the tale of terror will be illuminated by a score that blends jazz, pop, rock and gospel.

Levine was entirely charming on the phone, possessed of the sort of energy and generosity that is immediately endearing. It's always good to note that when I talk to these creative folk, they are inevitably at their busiest: at the cusp of a performance, or an opportunity to camp out at Vassar in a cocoon of artistic thrall, or on the road promoting something – as Levine worked very diligently to make sure we had a chance to talk, I reconfirmed my appreciation of taking up a block of his time to pick their delightful brains.

Levine said that he was inspired by a particularly uninspiring college class several years ago: "The professor brought up Guy Fawkes Day, and nobody knew about it. I looked it up, and (the musical) started as a play, just for fun. I had no idea what I wanted to do with it."

For a time, Levine played around with developing a work of fiction. "As I was finding these road blocks, I went back to original story, and it was even better what I was coming up with."

Levine echoed a familiar theme that's been trailing each preview article I've written about this season's Powerhouse productions: musicals that aren't musicals. Music has found an entry point into several offerings, and in each case, the creators shared the concept that the songs weren't being used in the manner of a traditional (say, Rodgers and Hammerstein) musical structure, where the song deliberately moves the plot forward.

"I kept writing more music, but I was hesitant to call it a musical," said Levine. It wasn't for lack of understanding the genre: "I grew up going to see musicals, but I didn't picture it in my head as a musical."

Levine also understood more about what his audience needed. "One of the things that's really important to me about theater is that you should have some sort of an angle for entertaining people. Even the most thought-provoking and deep pieces of theater hinges on keeping you engaged."

He was also very aware of what was lying just below the surface of the Guy Fawkes legend – an act of large-scale terrorism – and how music might be the ideal counterpoint.

"I knew that the topic was an important and controversial; it's in the zeitgeist," he said. "The circumstances alone were dire; it (music) could be used as much in the opposite direction. Music, from my end is joyful. It is emotionally challenging when music is working against the subject matter. That's what I've been trying to do with 'Bonfire.'"