

In the summer of 2017, *36 Questions: The Podcast Musical* released in three acts on Apple Podcasts. The show was widely heralded as ground-breaking in form. A review in *Wired* calls it “the start... into a sprawling ecosystem of audio aimed at evolving what podcasts can be.”¹ The *New York Times* hails it as “the future of musical theatre” that will have “musical theatre writers asking themselves about the form.”² Even the show’s tagline situates it as seminal: *The Podcast Musical*, emphasis on the monolithic definite article. In a phone interview conducted with me last March, co-writer and co-director Chris Littler says, “Obviously there are radio dramas and there are audio musicals, but we felt like we were inventing a form as we were doing it.”³

The podcast musical rose out of a prompt by Zack Akers and Skip Bronkie, the producers of the wildly acclaimed podcast *Limetown*. Skip and Zack approached Chris Littler with the logline for a potential audio drama: a couple’s marriage is on the rocks, and they’re trying to save their relationship with a list of questions designed to make two strangers fall in love. The list derives from “The Experimental Generation of Experimental Closeness,”⁴ a psychology article published in 1997, and is colloquially known as the “36 questions.” Chris brought on Ellen Winter, with whom he plays in Chamber Band, to co-write and co-direct the project. Both collaborators are playwrights, songwriters, and musicians. Skip and Zack suggested that the show be “Richard Linklater-esque,” remembers Chris, “At some point they were like, ‘let’s do a

¹ Charley Locke, “Musicals (Yes, Musicals) Are About to Shake Up Podcasting,” *Wired*, July 14, 2017.

² Alexis Soloski, “This Podcast Is a Love Story, for Your Ears Only,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2017.

³ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, phone interview by Janine Chow on February 16, 2017.

⁴ Arthur Aron et al, “The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol 23, Issue 4 (April 1, 1997): 363 – 377.

musical instead’ and to this day we don’t really understand where that came from, but we’re glad they did.”⁵

In the pilot version of *36 Questions* presented in June 2016, the show had not yet broken into the podcast form. “That version of the show was drastically different,” recalls Chris.⁶ The podcast musical, at that point, more closely resembled its counterparts in audio drama and on Broadway: it had a narrator, a full cast of characters, and an ensemble. “We hadn’t quite answered the question of why this needed to be a podcast,”⁷ says Ellen. The writers would go on to spend another six months reworking the show, then another six months producing it.

Why *did* this musical need to be a podcast? One of the most common criticisms of audio drama is that it is blind—an accusation of absence unique to the form. Visual art is never charged with being deaf, nor dance with being mute, nor even music with being blind. Clive Cazeaux, in an essay on phenomenology and radio drama, reclaims blindness as a positive invitational state of “calling for completion.”⁸ Ellen reflects that sentiment in another comment on the *36 Questions* pilot: “When we listened back, it was like, ‘Oh I can *see* this’ ... versus ‘I am using my imagination to tell the story.’ It felt like we were missing something.”⁹

What, then, does the condition of blindness produce in the podcast musical? What does *36 Questions* give to the imagination that could not be possible in a visual medium? Part of the answer lies with intimacy writ into the framework of the musical. In the process of workshopping the show, Chris and Ellen went on a writing retreat in upstate New York, taking

⁵ Littler and Winter, interview by Janine Chow.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Clive Cazeaux, “Phenomenology and Radio Drama,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 45 (April 2005): 158.

⁹ Ibid.

with them a friend from their band—“a single-person focus group,”¹⁰ Chris jokes in another interview. Their friend hated musicals. During the retreat, Chris and Ellen shared music with him ranging from Stephen Sondheim’s *Company* to Dave Malloy’s *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*. They realized that their band-mate disengaged during chorus and ensemble numbers, but responded to ballads and solo songs. Without visual cues, it is difficult to distinguish between a great number of multiple characters—especially in the context of a musical chorus. This helped them to narrow down their cast to two vocally differentiated characters: Judith, the wife, and Jase, the husband. (The writers would later add a duck and a child to motivate dialogue when either character was absent. “Cooper [the child] was 100% a device,” laughs Ellen.¹¹)

Absent a narrator, the podcast musical is structured as voice memos recorded on Judith’s first-generation iPhone. Heard through the audioposition of phone, the show invites listeners into small spaces antithetical to the Broadway stage, like the cab of a car or a darkened bedroom closet. Moreover, the device of the phone allows the listener not only spatial but somatic intimacy: “Every breath and sigh and inhale and exhale reads on the microphone,” says Jonathan Groff, who plays Jase, in an interview with *The New York Times*. “Everything is like a close-up on the voice.”¹² What most fascinating about the iPhone audioposition, however, is that it forces the podcast to progress in real-time. The show takes place in three acts: Act 1 includes an opening montage and the afternoon of July 28, 2009; Act 2 takes place over the course of the night of July 28, 2009; and Act 3 opens with the morning of July 28, 2009, before leaping into a montage of short snippets that bring the listener to 2017. Outside of the two montages (which

¹⁰ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, interview by Stuart Spencer, *Onstage Blog*, August 15, 2017.

¹¹ Littler and Winter, interview by Janine Chow.

¹² Soloski, “This Podcast is a Love Story.”

constitute a total of three minutes of the two-hour thirty-six minute podcast) the listener experiences time as the characters do. The end result is the unique experience of eavesdropping on a kaleidosonically mobile drama spanning the life of an iPhone.

While intimacy is the key feature of a musical *qua* podcast, the other product of blindness is deeper attention to sound. R. Murray Schafer, in his seminal work on sounds studies, differentiates between hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes in the history of listening. Post-industrial society lives in a perpetually lo-fi soundscape oversaturated with acoustic signals, exchanging distinct and discrete sounds for broad-band noise. “Perspective is lost ... there is no distance,” writes Schafer, “only presence.”¹³ And yet, the condition of blindness in a podcast forces its listeners to regain that sonic perspective in a world where every sound is there by deliberate inclusion. The movement of a musical drama into a purely sonic form also lends attention to the nuances of the music and lyrics themselves. The writers were aware of this paradigm shift in the transfer from stage to headphones. Asked about writing for individual rather than collective audiences, both Chris and Ellen emphasize the importance of pivot points in the music: “Where are we at the beginning of the movement, and where are we at the end of the movement, and what do we know about the characters that will organically justify that change?”¹⁴ To the close listener of the podcast musical, world-building and character-building is carried by not only the dialogue, but also Foley, music, rhythm, meter, tempo, and rhyme.

In this paper, I track non-dialogic sonic elements of *36 Questions* to investigate a change in the husband’s character from the first to the third act. While Jase’s shift from a rigid to a fluid approach to truth is merely stated in the dialogue, its fluctuations can be intimately tracked

¹³ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape* (New York: Destiny Books, 1997), 931.

¹⁴ Littler and Winter, interview by Janine Chow.

through choices in fuller soundscape. His arrival at moral greyness, I argue, is anticipated in the sound of the podcast before the character even knows it himself.

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The central tension of *36 Questions* is in Jase and Judith's opposite relationships to truth. Broadly writ, the plot is predicated on a lie: the revelation that Judith had assumed a false identity when she first met Jase, and the two years she maintained the alias of Natalie Cook. The podcast covers Judith's attempts and ultimate failure to reconcile with her husband, and Jase's subsequent angst eight years later. The framing device of the iPhone marks Judith's commitment to truth in her gamble to win back her husband: at the top of the first act, she addresses the phone, "I've been lying to my husband since the moment I met him. I'm going on the record here to make this right."¹⁵ In the couple's first encounter, however, Jase remains fixated on the lie: "I don't know who you are,"¹⁶ he claims, and accuses his wife of being "more than just something who lied, that makes you a liar."¹⁷ What is striking, here, is that Jase maintains the moral high ground from a position of uncertainty: his use of the epithet "liar" carries with it a current of righteousness, but his complaint that he does not know his wife marks him as ignorant of the truth. Judith, who holds the truth of her own history and identity, is unfazed and unapologetic in this encounter, merely stating the fact of her lies without emotion.¹⁸ The impetus to truth looms large over both husband and wife throughout the podcast, who repeatedly state things "for the record."

¹⁵ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, *36 Questions: Act I*, podcast audio, July 10, 2017: 3:52.

¹⁶ Ibid 12:38.

¹⁷ Ibid 13:07.

¹⁸ Ibid 12:50.

As the show progresses, Jase continues to rebuff Judith for withholding the truth. He vacillates bitterly over the sense that Natalie Cook is at once “imaginary” and “real to me.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, despite the record, Judith struggles to tell the truth, resorting to generalizations and jokes in answer to the thirty-six questions. Asked *If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?*, she responds “Literally everything.”²⁰ Prompted by Jase’s anger, she expands her answer into a song about her emotionally abusive parents who lie to evade responsibility with the mantra “It’s our word / Against theirs.”²¹ Lying, for her, is a habit—“the only thing I know how to.”²² Though this makes Jase more sympathetic towards his estranged wife, he remains adamant in his commitment to truth. Their differing values are codified in the answer to the sixteenth question, *What do you value most in a friendship?*: Judith answers *dependability* and Jase answers *honesty*. He leaves her at the end of the second act in a song bitingly titled “Reality.”

The couple’s characters and moral codes, however, are more than merely stated. They are audible not only in the oscillating discourse around truth and lies, but in every other sonic element of the show. Following the opening montage, the Foley that introduces each character is enough to suggest a broader dichotomy of chaos and order. The July 28 recording opens in Judith’s car, where the listener hears tires squeal, car horns sweep by, and erratic metallic jostling, suggesting that Judith has narrowly escaped a collision.²³ Following that, Jase’s entrance into the soundscape is through the sound of drilling, a sonic metonym for his larger project of remodeling his parents’ summer home.²⁴ In these Foley introductions, Judith is marked

¹⁹ Ibid, “Natalie Cook.”

²⁰ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, *36 Questions: Act 2*, podcast audio, July 24, 2017: 17:31.

²¹ Ibid, “Our Word.”

²² Ibid, “A Better Version.”

²³ *Act 1*, 4:30.

²⁴ Ibid 6:26.

as destructive while Jase is marked as constructive. These traits go on to align with either character's approach to truth.

As a case study in character dichotomies, the final song of Act 1 provides a productive opportunity to place Jase and Judith in direct comparison. Fittingly entitled "For the Record," this is the first song in which both characters sing in equal measure. The number is structured in a sequence of sung soliloquies where first Jase, then Judith, is left alone with the iPhone and Henry the duck. The song then merges into a duet on the eponymous refrain of "36, 36, 36, 36 Questions," and finally becomes a triumphant chorus fitting for the final number before intermission (or, in this case, a week before the release of the next act). The soliloquies, in particular, are useful for establishing the sonic markers of each character. Simply layering these verses on top of each other in an audio editor is enough to suggest a difference between the two: while Jase seems to maintain a simple rhythmic pattern, Judith seems to overflow the limits of the melody.

A look at the score confirms this notion of containment and overflow. The song is in common time, with four quarter note beats to each measure. Jase begins each melodic phrase on the second beat, expressing several discrete ideas separated by quarter note rests.²⁵ Judith, in contrast, begins her melodies half a beat earlier in the pick-up to the second beat, blurring one idea into the next.²⁶ Her earlier start suggests her eagerness or impatience to speak; her elision of the full rest suggests an aversion to silence. The rhythmic pattern established with the addendum of an extra eighth note is comparable to a line of iambic pentameter with eleven syllables—the unmatched half-beat (*qua* iamb) lends a sense of imbalance or uncertainty to her words. Whereas

²⁵ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, "For the Record," vocal score, 2-18.

²⁶ Ibid 49-67.

Jase states with surety the sentiment that accommodating his wife is self-destructive, Judith sings with surprise about the apparent success of her impromptu plan.

Regularity of rhythm also plays a part in differentiating between husband and wife. At two parallel points in their solo verses, each partner sings the same four descending notes. Strikingly, while Jase sings these on four evenly spaced eighth notes,²⁷ Judith violates this pattern by rushing some notes and lingering over others. Her “know that it would” elongates “know” into a quarter note tied to a sixteenth note, then rushes “that it would” into sixteenth notes to catch up with the melody by the next bar.²⁸ Similarly, her “still afraid that” blitzes past “still a-“ as sixteenth notes and lingers over “fraid” for a full beat.²⁹ Later, where Jase sings “answer” over two quarter notes,³⁰ Judith divides the monosyllabic “knives” into the same two notes³¹ at twice the speed, taking one beat where Jase takes two. Notably, nowhere in these opening verses does Jase ever sing on a sixteenth note. Judith’s erratic rhythm—which may reflect impulsivity, or passion, or whimsy—forms a clear foil to Jase’s regularity. The contrast continues to the dichotomy established by the jostling car and the whirring drill: chaos and order. By a further stretch of the sonic imagination, Jase abides by the rules while Judith breaks them.

Further, not only does Judith’s melody overflow the bounds established by Jase’s, but her lyrics oversaturate the melody itself. Placing the soliloquies in parallel, Judith literally says more than Jase in the same space of time. A quick glance at the score establishes this visually: Judith’s measures are palpably wider than Jase’s to accommodate more words. Indeed, in these opening verses, Judith has 94 words to Jase’s 80. At one parallel point, Jase sings three notes “(a)-ware of

²⁷ Ibid 9, 17.

²⁸ Ibid 55.

²⁹ Ibid 61.

³⁰ Ibid 23.

³¹ Ibid 67.

that” where Judith sings five notes “be a harder sell”; at another, Jase sings four notes “still go my way”³² where Judith sings six “(a)-bout the way I’ll answer.”³³ Notably, while Jase seems to use more monosyllables than Judith, both characters average 77% monosyllabic lyrics over the course of the musical. Perhaps this impression of Jase being more monosyllabic derives from these points of contrast where his monosyllables fall on quarter notes, compared to Judith’s eighths. Jase’s lyrics demonstrate concision and control, reflecting his reservation in concert with his rule-abiding nature suggested by the rhythm. Judith’s lyrics, in comparison, seem to lack control. Where Jase is rigid, Judith is fluid. This dichotomy feeds into a clear analogy to their respective approaches to truth.

Thus far: overflow, rhythmic regularity, and lyric saturation. Another point of comparison lies with the alignment of spoken and musical emphasis. For lyrics to sound like natural dialogue over music, stresses in the words should line up with accents in the music. In common time, this means that ictuses fall at the start of the first or third beat. Stephen Sondheim, an acknowledged influence on Chris and Ellen, is particularly adamant about the importance of this alignment in his book on lyric-writing.³⁴ It is therefore striking when spoken and musical emphasis fail to synchronize. Predictably, Jase passes the test, underlining the certainty with which he speaks at this point. Judith, meanwhile, fails the test. In the third line of her sung soliloquy, the downbeat falls at the end of “4am,” lending weight not to the time itself but to an incongruous part of an abbreviation.³⁵ Three lines later, the musical accent falls in the middle of “given the choice,” emphasizing the unimportant definite article over the key word “choice.”³⁶

³² Ibid 16.

³³ Ibid 60.

³⁴ Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

³⁵ “For the Record,” vocal score, 53-54.

³⁶ Ibid 64.

The misalignment of emphasis in Judith's sung soliloquy, more than mere mechanical coincidence, reflects her tendency towards lies. She is, essentially, inconsistent. Her ideas do not line up.

The final sonic difference between husband and wife is in their use of rhyme. Once again, Sondheim highlights the importance of perfect rhyme in creating a sense of completeness.³⁷ Rhyming departures, then, bear investigation. Jase's lyrics consistently arrive at perfect rhymes, pairing *that* with *hat* and *pride* with *lied*.³⁸ Judith, meanwhile, pairs *sell* with *well*, but turns to slant rhyme to match *lies* with *eyes* and then tack on *knives*.³⁹ Jase's rhymes mark his consistency not only in the rhythm of his music, but also the sound of his words. Judith's slant rhymes demonstrate her tendency to bend the rules. It is especially suggestive that Jase achieves a perfect rhyme with *lied* while Judith fails to do so with *lie*—Judith cannot resolve the lie, even with a second attempt.

Having established Jase's sonic alignment with regularity and rules and Judith's sonic signature of inconsistency and overflow, it is productive to track where Jase moves between either model as he listens to Judith, rejects her, and finally subscribes to her worldview over the course of the next two acts. Within the song itself, as soon as Jase admits to sympathy for his estranged wife, he begins to move into Judith's rhythmic patterns. Not only does he begin the musical phrase in the second half of a beat, but he also sings on a pair of rapid sixteenth notes.⁴⁰ Overflow and irregularity, then, enter the moment he relaxes his moral righteousness to feel for Judith. Here, he struggles to locate his characteristic certainty as he battles between the impulse

³⁷ Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*.

³⁸ "For the Record," vocal score, 6, 10, 18, 22.

³⁹ Ibid 52, 57, 62, 66, 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid 31.

to reject the woman he has labelled as liar and the impulse to sympathize with his wife of two years. The pattern repeats itself in misaligned stresses. Soon after, spoken and musical emphases fall out of sync as the downbeat falls incongruously on the second syllable of “pathological.”⁴¹ Finally, Jase delivers his first slant rhyme at the end of the first soliloquy, pairing *clear* with *spare*.⁴² The imperfect rhyme undermines the notion that he clearly has nothing left of his old life to spare; no matter how assertively he states his stance here, the music betrays him. Something remains of his regard for Judith.

The song proceeds into Judith’s soliloquy to the phone and duck, interspersed with several dialogic sequences. In the final movement of “For the Record,” Jase’s verses subject the listener to tonal and rhythmic whiplash as he oscillates between rejection and acceptance of Judith. Rigidity of structure marks his adherence to the rules and his maintenance of the moral high ground; fluidity of structure marks the duality of his feelings for and against his wife. Following a long dialogic sequence, Judith resumes the song by comparing their current situation with their first date. Jase verbally rejects the comparison, but remains musically in accord with Judith. He sings, “This is diff’rent,”⁴³ skipping over a syllable to force the word to fit in the music in a manner that recalls Judith’s lyric oversaturation. The next phrase is sung on quarter note triplets⁴⁴—an even more significant break from regularity in its essential departure from common time. One measure later, however, he snaps back into the established rhythm, with “life was a lie” mapping onto the quarter note beat.⁴⁵ It is notable that Judith’s parallel lyric four measures before is still sung on triplets, making Jase’s rhythm a deliberate departure from

⁴¹ Ibid 33.

⁴² Ibid 40, 43.

⁴³ Ibid 102-103.

⁴⁴ Ibid 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid 105.

fluidity. The memory of Judith's lie, here, reminds him to his moral rigidity and outrage. And yet, his "lie" forms a slant rhyme with Judith's "wine."⁴⁶ Is this a further rejection of his wife? Or yet another whiplash back towards accepting her?

The song becomes a duet, then blossoms into a chorus. Another unique capacity of the podcast musical is its ability to create a chorus from a cast of two, by virtue of layering multiple recordings of their voices on top of one another. In this way, podcast does not violate its established intimacy, but still achieves the necessary magnitude for the closing number of a musical act. (And besides, as Ellen quips in our interview, "Who wouldn't want eight Jonathan Groff's in their ear?"⁴⁷) The repeated refrain of "36, 36, 36 Questions" is well under way when Jase is first layered. Backup Jase 1, as he is called in the score, sings the refrain of an earlier song: "I said I'd have dinner with Judith."⁴⁸ Singing a pattern of quarter note triplets and expressing his conflicted impulse to get to know his wife again, Backup Jase 1 represents his ambivalent self. Later, skipping over Backup Jase 2 who harmonizes with the 36 Questions refrain, Backup Jase 3 sings the theme of an even earlier song: "One thing." Sung on stolid monosyllables atop simple quarter notes, this refrain is overwhelmingly controlled and regular. That song is itself an exercise in order, a list song of Jase's tasks in remodeling the house. But number one on the list, the "one thing," is his resolution to "forget about you [Judith]."⁴⁹ Backup Jase 3 is his adamant, moral self. Importantly, Backup Jase 1 and Backup Jase 3 never sing simultaneously: Jase is fragmented in two, with his multiple voices debating each other—the angel and devil on either shoulder. Backup Jase 1 has the last word, leaving Jase morally relaxed

⁴⁶ Ibid 102, 105.

⁴⁷ Littler and Winter, interview by Janine Chow.

⁴⁸ "For the Record," vocal score, 137.

⁴⁹ "One Thing," *Act I*.

and open to the possibility of reconciliation with Judith, as he agrees to do the 36 questions with her.

Jase is relatively quiet throughout Act 2, as Judith drives the narrative until the end of the act. His musical contribution at the beginning of the act is to once more sing through his conflictedness over Judith's identity: "I tried so hard to separate / Who you are from who you were / But now I'm reevaluating / How similar you are to her."⁵⁰ The lyrics, quite obviously, track a moment where Jase is open to changing his mind. Strangely, however, the music follows an exacting rhythm, and even introduces a regular quarter note drumbeat when he starts his verse. It also exhibits perfect rhyme. Here, the rhythmic and rhyming regularity seems not to reflect moral uprightness, but Jase's own grasp of truth—in beginning to better understand the woman he thought he did not know, he regains some level of control over uncertainty. One verse later, the drumbeat shifts to alternating dotted quarter notes and eighth notes, and his tempo slows as he lingers over "Natalie."⁵¹ Uncertainty and irregularity return with that name, which stands for two years of deceit. At the same time, the fluidity of this verse participates in the Judith model, once more leaving him open to her.

The next two songs unfold Judith's history with her methodically mendacious parents and her desperate desire to separate herself from her past. The result of this honesty is that Jase kisses her, which seems to signal the fruition of her hopes for reconciliation. Jase, however, is still living in a liminal space, oscillating between his position of rhythmic regularity and fluidity—moral rigidity and relaxation. Finally confronted with the need to decide whether or not he has re-accepted Judith, he submits ambiguity as truth: "I guess I want it on record that I haven't

⁵⁰ "We Both," *Act 2*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

agreed to anything.”⁵² The ensuing argument subtly shifts his stance from adherence to truth to need for trust. Judith asks when she will be released from “lie jail”⁵³ and he explodes, “I’m never going to be able to trust you again.”⁵⁴ The realization that, no matter how much of the truth Judith reveals, Jase will never be able to trust her, sediments his decision to reject her. The song “Reality” embraces a critical duality: he loves Judith, but he must leave her. The result is a blend of their musical signatures. The rhythm is regular, often consisting of monosyllables yoked to each beat, but the meter is 6/8—more fluid and swung than common time. The rhymes are perfect, but many of the verses fail to rhyme at all. The sound of the song reflects Jase’s reconciliation of his moral adherence to truth and honesty with his love for his wife. For the first time, he does not oscillate, but recognizes both models (à la Backup Jase 1 and 3) as true, paradoxically integrating regularity and fluidity. The character of the music anticipates what Jase only explicitly realizes one act and eight years later: that the truth can be multiple.

At the top of the third act, Judith tries one last time to persuade Jase to stay, only to have him drive away. She mourns her loss, then leaves the record with him, placing the iPhone in his mailbox. From 2009 to 2017, Jase continues to record—first to rant against Judith, then to report on developments in his life, and finally to talk in apostrophe to his absent ex-wife. With lived experience and the birth of his first child, he has seen his own moral standard shift. Crucially, he states for the record: “I lie every day now. Every day. I make up stuff to make things move, and that’s fine.”⁵⁵ Implicit in the designation of lies as “fine” is the sense that trust need not be founded on truth.

⁵² *Act 2*, 42:50.

⁵³ *Ibid* 44:08.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 44:24.

⁵⁵ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, *36 Questions: Act 3*, podcast audio, August 7, 2017: 27:46.

The final song of *36 Questions*, monolithically entitled “The Truth,” is intrinsically linked to “Reality.” From their titles alone, both make a claim about the actual nature of things. At first listen, the songs seem opposed: the former states facts as reality while the latter claims that truth is ultimately unknowable.⁵⁶ But, as earlier analysis suggests, the musical structure of “Reality” anticipates the message in “The Truth” that “two sides can both be right.”⁵⁷ What, then, is left to the final number in Jase’s character development? Surprisingly, it is Judith who we hear to subtly change. This song is the first time the couple sings in unison since the top of the second act. The piece is largely syncopated and saturated with triplets and slant rhyme, marking Jase’s subscription to Judith’s world-view that “the truth doesn’t exist in black-and-white.”⁵⁸ At the same time, however, the eponymous refrain falls on a surprisingly sedate alternation of monosyllabic quarter notes and quarter note rests: “The truth (rest) is (rest) that...”⁵⁹ In striking contrast to “For the Record,” Judith follows an achingly simple rhythmic pattern after Jase’s model. The musical phrase then leans into a triplet with “never real(ly know)”⁶⁰, effectively wedding both Jase and Judith’s styles. The refrain reconciles Jase’s certainty with Judith’s uncertainty in a confident assertion of unknowability. This conclusion of the podcast musical is not unlike the Socratic paradox: “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.”

What is striking, here, is that while Judith justifies her habit of lying in the first two acts, she never defends it. In “The Truth,” both Jase and Judith recognize lies as necessary and the truth itself as essentially fluid. Tracked sonically, the arc of the podcast musical is towards

⁵⁶ Chris Littler and Ellen Winter, “The Truth,” vocal score, 52.

⁵⁷ Ibid 45-47.

⁵⁸ Ibid 42-44.

⁵⁹ Ibid 44-50, etc.

⁶⁰ Ibid 52.

comfort with complexity. The music moves from a dichotomy of regularity and irregularity, to oscillation between the two, to integration of the two, to—finally—a seamless wedding of the two in a single phrase. Jase learns to lie. Judith learns to tell the truth. The musical, touchingly, is left unresolved. Its final line is a fragment sentence ending on dominant tone. The end to the phrase “the truth is” is left to listener to imagine.

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