

Coming to BW: musical theater songs of Daniel Ruffing, inspired by the Internet

by Jarrett Hoffman



Internet memes as musical inspiration? Composer Daniel Ruffing has written musical theater songs based on viral videos like Kylie Jenner’s singsong greeting to her young daughter (“Rise and Shine”), a driver’s surprising reaction to a construction sign (“Road Work Ahead”), and one woman’s first impression of a new drink (“Kombucha Girl”).

Ruffing has also written songs inspired by the TV show *The Good Place*, and he’s working on a musical about YouTube celebrity Jenna Marbles — whose name

graces an upcoming show of Ruffing’s music. “He’s Lost His Marbles” takes place on Sunday, February 23 at 7:00 pm at Baldwin Wallace’s Gamble Auditorium, presented by the University’s Arts Management Association. Tickets are available [online](#).

Among the selections on that program will be one of Ruffing’s biggest hits: the hilarious, wacky, and adult-language-heavy [I Want to Be Tall](#). One verse goes like this:

*Seven inches taller
It’s my new years resolution
I’m 32 years old, b****
And I can f***** do it*

And much of the song can be traced back to Jenna Marbles herself. “She posted a video on her channel in January of last year called [I Want To Be Tall](#),” Ruffing said during a recent phone call. “For the first five minutes or so, she’s at a piano playing

the basic chord structure that I use, and she's improvising these lyrics. So I turned that improv section into this song — I just fleshed it out and added some verses.”

It was received so well online that Ruffing kept writing. Eventually the project became more ambitious. “These weren't planned to be anything more than just individual songs,” Ruffing said. “But I would get at least 30 comments a day that were like, ‘Why aren't you making this into a real thing?’” That “real thing” is a semi-biographical Jenna Marbles musical, now in development — and both Marbles and Julien Solomita, her boyfriend and fellow vlogger, are [thrilled](#).

If it wasn't already clear, Ruffing is making a career for himself in a way that is distinctly modern. Twitter, especially, has been an important tool for him. He realized that hashtags on that platform, more so than on others, can go a long way toward making something go viral. “I posted *I Want To Be Tall*, tagged Jenna in it, used some hashtags, and that kind of picked up,” he said. “I was like, ‘Oh, this actually works.’”

He also created the #hellyeahchallenge on Twitter, inviting people to respond with videos of themselves singing some of the lyrics to *I Want To Be Tall*. “I'd seen a couple different musical challenges on Twitter, and that gave me the idea to make one for my song,” Ruffing said. “It didn't work the best, but it still helped quite a bit.”



Ruffing and Victoria Shell in I Want To Be Tall

Listeners might hear a hint of *The Book of Mormon* in *I Want To Be Tall*. “A lot of people have told me that,” Ruffing said. He enjoys playing with genre expectations. “People are thinking, ‘Oh, classical Broadway songs, this is going to be so nice.’ And then it's not exactly what you expect.”

The words to *I Want To Be Tall* were mostly in place from the start, thanks to Marbles' original video. "For the next song, I had to write all of the lyrics, which was a big challenge," Ruffing said. "I've slowly been figuring out how best to do things. It's definitely been a learning process."

Ruffing's writing style is down-to-earth. "I'm not really trying to go for deep meaning," he said. Instead, he'll think of something funny and put it down. Sometimes he'll change it to make a rhyme, but often it just sticks.

It might surprise you that this composer is still only a junior in college — he's studying arts management and entrepreneurship at Baldwin Wallace. The entrepreneurial side certainly checks out, but how does management play into his career?

"We have a lot of networking events in arts management," Ruffing said. "That's how I've been able to get in touch with some of my performers, and even the director of this concert." It's also given him knowledge of copyright law. "I know I'm doing everything within the law and not violating Jenna's rights. That's probably the biggest thing for me, especially since I'm writing all these songs that are based on pre-existing things or people."

Ruffing estimates that getting the Jenna Marbles musical staged is still five or six years away. In the meantime, Sunday's concert is a step down that path. In other words — "Road Work Ahead."

"He's Lost His Marbles" is directed by Jack-Anthony Ina, with music direction by Lindsay Miller, assistant direction by Sarah Farris, and stage management by Christian Andrews.

Performers include Felix Albino, Jack Brudos, Kaitlyn Carr, Andy Faria, Sarah Farris, Jordyn Freetage, Audrey Hare, Nadina Hassan, Autumn Key, Retta Laumann, Claire Marie Miller, Ricky Moyer, Grace Oddo, Ethan Peterson, Emily Polcyn, Victoria Shell, and Natalie Steen.

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