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CTC ORDERS `HAM' AND `CHEESE' AND CUTS THE MUSTARD

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As a composer and librettist of more than a dozen works of opera and musical theater, Edward Barnes is frequently asked how he decides that an idea or a story should be set to music.

His answer almost always has to do with passion, and such is the case with his musicalization of the children's book ``The Old Man Who Loved Cheese," which premieres tonight at the Children's Theatre Company.

``It was very clear to me," Barnes said without a hint of cynicism, ``that the old man is extremely passionate about cheese; so passionate that words couldn't possibly express that passion. He has to take it to one more level and sing about it."

OK, so maybe that sounds a little crazy, but to read Garrison Keillor's story for kids is to understand the true nature of Wallace P. Flynn's obsession. His love for cheese - the smellier the better - banishes his wife to a faraway island, chases his children out of the house and results in a showdown with the dreaded Cheese Police.

``This is a passion that knows no bounds," deadpanned CTC artistic director Peter Brosius, who commissioned Barnes and who directs the production. ``A passion that results in criminality. A passion that allows you to do anything from a rumba to a waltz. In a way, you're talking about a mad love story - it sort of stands in for all of those irrational passions that people have."

Moving ``The Old Man Who Loved Cheese" from the page to the musical stage has been a yearlong project. It began when Brosius phoned Barnes, a New York composer, looking for a companion piece to fill out an evening that would also include a musical version of Dr. Seuss' ``Green Eggs and Ham."

Keillor's book shared the same silly sensibility, a similar use of language and, of course, an overarching food metaphor.

Barnes submitted three drafts to Brosius. Each time, the director exhorted the composer to heighten and stretch the emotions, to get larger and wackier, both in terms of music and character.

“Peter’s a very good dramaturge,” said Barnes, “and he kept pushing me to find the levels and layers of passion on passion on passion.”

Such prodding was necessary, Brosius said. Though he is an accomplished composer, Brosius said Barnes was missing a key life experience necessary to give himself over to the story.

“We had to introduce him to cheese curds.”

In addition to Brosius, Barnes tapped the Bard of Lake Wobegon himself for some input.

“Early on, when I first chose the story, I spoke with Garrison Keillor,” Barnes said. “I think he wanted me to know that he was open to additions and discussions, and then he gave me the freedom to think for myself.”
When Barnes decided to alter the story’s ending - in which Wallace P. Flynn gives up his cheese-lust in favor of his family - Keillor was open to the new interpretation.

“I’ve worked with some writers who were adamant about every single word they’d written being in the show. Others just sign a waiver and say you can do whatever you want,” Barnes said “He gave me the freedom to do what I wanted to do, but he requested that he be involved.”

Brosius is hoping that “The Old Man Who Loved Cheese” catches on with music and theater ensembles in the manner of “Green Eggs and Ham,” which is a staple of programming for young audiences throughout the country.

In both cases, the stories embrace a sunny tolerance for eccentricities, and the music, he said, “allows the characters to venture into a world where you only go when you allow your passions to drive you.”