

Play it again

Having just completed a string of sold out shows off-Broadway, local residents Ted Dykstra & Richard Greenblatt are bringing their hit musical *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* home to Toronto

by Belinda Bruce

When Richard Greenblatt was 10 years old, he made a pact with his mother: he would study piano for ten years: he would practice for at least one hour every day, even on lesson days. His only days off would be statutory holidays. Richard and his mom shook hands on it.

Young Ted Dykstra had a piano teacher who would say part way through his lesson that she had a headache and was going upstairs "for a cup of tea and a lie-down", and that he should finish his lesson on his own and let himself out at the end of it. Each time, Ted continued working on the things she said and went home. He thought such treatment meant he had done something wrong, so he never told anyone about her.

Until one night a few years ago, when Dykstra, 37, was chatting with actor/director and friend, Greenblatt, 45. The two men had recently performed together in *So You Think You're Mozart*, a play which required considerable musicianship. Richard played Mozart who taught piano to a kid, played by Ted. Both of them realized the skill the other had for playing the keys. Theirs was a harmonious meeting. They talked about their pasts studying classical piano. The parallels were astounding.

"Both of us had one teacher for a long time," Ted says. "We both fought with our parents about practising..."

"We both did exams and competitions," adds Richard.

Dykstra: "Both studied piano for ten years, quit when we were 17, and went into theatre. Both loved to perform more than we loved to work." — both laugh heartily — "and we realized there was a show there."

Their conversation became a 20-minute theatre workshop piece about the agonies and ecstasies of studying

classical piano as children, for the Tarragon Springs Arts Fair in 1996. But that was the abridged version; ideas overflowed. The duo applied for an Ontario Arts Council grant to flesh out the work into full-length play. The result was a two-man show of comedy, drama and musical virtuosity in which Dykstra and Greenblatt perform a variety of music from Bach to Billy Joel, and play all 40 parts, including their young selves, piano teachers, adjudicators, parents, and peers. *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* became an instant success, far beyond their expectations, garnering a Dora Mavor Moore Award for outstanding production in 1996, and taking them on a cross-country tour that grossed 1.8 million dollars.



▲ DYKSTRA STUDIED THEATRE AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY

"Part of the appeal of the show is its essential theatricality," Richard explains. "So bald — two pianos, two guys in tuxes. We create everything from imagination, acting and lights." "Very Canadian that way," says Ted. "The rule for props was: you couldn't have it if it didn't fit in the piano bench."

The show strikes a chord with people from all walks of life, not just those who took music lessons. Anyone who emulated a hero, anyone who put energy into the pursuit of a dream can relate to the two boys in the play.

One man, for example, told them his passion was tennis. And when the young Ricky in the play is told by a teacher that he's not Glenn Gould, this man heard "You're not John McEnroe."

The play has such an empathic effect because it's about more than just studying music; it's a journey of self-discovery. The two autobiographical characters, Ricky and Teddy, reach the point when they must decide if becoming classical pianists is their true life desire, because of the incredible commitment required to achieve this goal.

Decisions like this are both painful and revelatory. In their real lives, Greenblatt and Dykstra decided to make a life in the theatre. But music still informs their work. Ted left his native Edmonton for theatre studies at McGill University, and graduated into such starring roles as Jerry Lee Louis in *Fire*, and cousin Kevin in *Tommy*. He says *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* is a "good barometer" of what he does as an actor.

Montreal-born Greenblatt didn't even put his piano skills on his resume when he first began looking for acting jobs, although his sideswept dream surfaced in other ways. Fifteen years ago, he wrote and toured a one-man show about a rehearsal pianist. As his career as an actor and director grew, music was an increasingly important "design element" in his work.

Writing *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* pulled the movements of their lives into a symphonic whole. And taught them a few lessons. Richard, for one, has three children, all of whom must take music lessons. "I'm a gentle, patient, loving father," he says, "but when it comes to music, I'm a pig." His remembrances of parental pressure in his own past give him the insight to attempt to curb his own overbearing nature when giving musical advice and instruction to his children.

Both agree that they are indebted to the Tarragon Theatre for bolstering the production. "We wouldn't be here today without the Tarragon," Richard says. "They've been so supportive all along the line. They asked us to do the original workshop. When Teddy and I raised money to develop the full-length play, the Tarragon didn't have any money, but they said 'Use our space, our facilities and artistic expertise.' It was their triumph as much as ours. We made sure they were rewarded for their support."

In fact, the volume of calls to book the show's second run at the Tarragon was so heavy, that the theatre had to invest in a new phone system. Dykstra and Greenblatt are proud of their hand in that, as well as in putting theatres across the country in the black.

Its box-office success and popular appeal solicited numerous offers to do a New York run. They chose an alliance with David Mirvish of Mirvish Productions for many reasons.

"Money," Ted laughs. "The fact that he is Canadian. The fact that I've worked with his company before on *Tommy*, and he could secure

us one of the best off-Broadway theatres in New York."

Richard: "And he's an honourable man. He truly cares about the theatre, and he has an emotional, personal connection to our show."

Despite a negative review in *The New York Times*, the show was a hit in the Big Apple. In March, they completed a five-month stint in Manhattan, striding through eight shows a week, bringing the total number of performances to 500. Understudies continued on in New York, as Greenblatt and Dykstra prepared for the life of the show after they have moved on to other things. This included auditioning performers for a U.S. tour slated for later this year, and another Canadian tour in 2000, which may cast two female leads. The show has also been translated into French in anticipation of productions in Montreal and France. It will play in England this summer, and has potential runs in Australia, Japan and other countries around the world. Greenblatt and Dykstra perform their last run together at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in July.

At home, the duo manages to find time to schedule a few special activities. You might think doing the show together would be bonding enough, but their relationship deepens, even in off-time. In a favourite Dupont Street cafe, Ted asks Richard for directions to the arena. Tomorrow, he will attend Richard's son's hockey game.

In planning tours, they tried to work in time to visit loved ones, but it wasn't always possible. Greenblatt sorely missed his wife, stage director and television host, Kate Lushington and their children — two of whom already boast promising careers as performers. Ties to the theatre community and his neighbours in the Annex make Toronto his centre of gravity.

"Where we are, the community aspect is very strong," says Greenblatt. "We have block parties every year and really get to know our neighbours. Everyone eats, dances — and if it rains, someone donates their house for the evening. The area is very kid-friendly. Our children go to St. Alban's Boys and Girls Club for swimming and after-school programs."

Future plans are home-based, with enough time to spend with family. He has already begun work on a play about siblings with writer/performer Diane Flacks.

Ted, a local resident of four years, enjoys jogging through the park near his home, and big bowls of soup at a local diner. "But," he admits, "home is wherever I am." He and wife, singer/songwriter Melanie Doane, plan to take up residence in New York sometime this fall.

Distance, though, will never dissolve the measure of mutual understanding between Dykstra and Greenblatt. In the play, the grown-up Ricky and Teddy, in a moment of drunken comradery, come to the conclusion that they are not the best piano players in the world, the country, nor even the city, but are, perhaps, the best in their neighbourhood.

"We never considered the show to be about failure," Ted says. "50 per cent of people who see it think it is, 50 per cent think it's about finding out who you are and celebrating that as the ultimate goal of life. The challenge for you as a person is not to find out what you can't do, but what you can do. We found out how to be number one, for us, and that's really what the play is about."

Greenblatt: "And we're playing piano better now than we ever have in our lives."

Ted and Richard may not have become concert pianists, but these two boys from the neighbourhood are the best piano-playing writer-actors around. That's a hard act to follow.



▲ GREENBLATT HAS ALSO DONE A ONE-MAN PIANO SHOW