

## Duncan's Awakening

*A 90's pop star finds deeper satisfaction with Tony Award-Winning Spring Awakening*

Around 1997, Duncan Sheik's career was anything but what his hit single would've suggested. *Barely Breathing* spent more than a year on the Hot 100 Billboard chart and allowed him to get near platinum, though eventually it made way to plateau. "People think I struck it rich, but none of my follow-up albums sold at all and I literally was down to \$12 in my bank account," admits the Montclair, New Jersey native, talking from in-studio where he's cutting his sixth album. But Sheik is suddenly...chic again. After writing the musical *Spring Awakening* for Broadway, he found himself on stage at Radio City Music Hall this year, a dream onto itself, but for a reason he never could have expected. "I didn't even write a speech," he chuckles. "And here I am having to make two!" Two Tony Awards, for Best Musical and Best Original Score, a career careening to greater heights and the financial independence which allows Sheik to write the kind of music he wants to, instead of playing to a pop audience which wasn't, admittedly, him to begin with.

So who is *him*? 37-year-old Sheik was born in Mountainside Hospital in Montclair, but his parents split up soon after the stork left, leaving him to be raised as much by his New Jersey grandparents as anyone else. But he didn't mind. It was the only life he knew. And, anyway, Grandma Joanne had a piano and she wanted desperately to share her love of music, an excitement which would spur Sheik on when his career was in a tailspin and those whispers in his head grew ever louder, saying that maybe it was time to do something else for a living.

"I lived with them in North Caldwell and it was idyllic. We had a German Shepherd, a big front yard and brooks all over the place," he recalls. "My grandmother had taken classes at Juilliard so it was just natural that we would play music together. I miss her." Grandma Joanne, who passed in 2002, at least got to see her grandson's first brush with fame when *Barely Breathing* broke, though much of the success was on the charts rather than in large audience venues. "I definitely got pigeonholed," he sighs. "I can only refer to it as the 'Starbucks woos rock days' and it just wasn't reaching the audience I wanted to reach. It was a learning experience—even though you're in *Details* magazine and you're a *pop star*, you're living in Hampton inns and playing in front of only 200 or 300 people a night." Quite different from the scene today, Sheik's last tour featuring a string quartet and, his favorite, "actual" tour buses! "I live like an adult and I love it," he offers. "I've been pretending to be a 22-year-old in a van for the past 10 years. It was fun while it lasted but this feels so much better."

And that feeling, of course, is due to *Spring Awakening*. Based on a controversial 19<sup>th</sup> century play by Frank Wedekind, Sheik was asked by his collaborator and friend Steven Sater to energize this tale of teenage love and sexuality. They had met on New Year's, ringing in 1999, and, before the millennium struck, they began the long journey which would lead to their greatest triumph. "Steven is someone who's just as good at listening as he is at voicing his views," says Sheik. "When you have that connection with someone

creatively, it's an incredible thing." So incredible that they got Michael Mayer to sign on as director, a move which would later result in Sheik's best film opportunity, scoring the Colin Farrell-vehicle *A Home at the End of the World*, Meyer directing the indie to strong reviews. And, strangely, it would be a man most noted for his film career who would save *Spring* when funding was dim. Tom Hulce, Oscar-nominated actor of Best Picture classic *Amadeus*, saw much of the same magic in Sheik and Sater's work, and, seven years and multiple workshops after that fated 1999 meeting, it made its debut at the Atlantic Theater Company in 2006. By the end of the year, and several sold-out shows later, it was Broadway and the culmination of a long-realized dream. "To see it finally happen after all that time," says Sheik. "It was surreal and made it all worth it."

Another thing that made the uphill battle worth it was a faith that's been with Sheik long before albums or awards. And this, he says, more than anything else, allowed him to carry on: "I have been a practicing Buddhist for 19 years as a member of the group sokagakkai, which means "value creating society" in Japanese. It promotes a very practical way to live." Chanting twice a day, including every morning, Sheik says he does sometimes have to work it in around his schedule. "When I was vacationing in Bali I would get up at 530am at the beach to chant—a perfect background—but when I'm in the studio recording until 2am I won't chant until 10am by a tree...I repeat out loud, 'Nam myoho renge kyo.' This stands for the law of cause and effect."

And maybe that's the most appropriate way to look at Sheik's Grammy-nominated and Tony Award-winning career: for every high, there will be a low—and a lesson. But, the constant, is his music, and maybe just a hint of his New Jersey upbringing. "I live in Tribeca, not so far from where I grew up," he says. "And I often think of my grandparents and how they went out of their way to make sure I was happy." As Sheik excuses himself politely to return to the recording of his most personal album yet, it seems his grandparents may have gotten their wish.