**Floyd Collins Program Note**

**Floyd Collins**, written by Tina Landau and composed by Adam Guettel, is a musical based on the seventeen days of the cave explorer’s entrapment from January 30th to February 16th 1925 inside the newly discovered Sand Cave, near Cave City, Kentucky. When searching for inspiration to write a new musical, Landau said she was drawn to the incident because of the personal battle Floyd Collins waged to survive and the disturbingly public media storm that had been generated as a result. “The thing that Adam and I responded to was simply an image of a man trapped. [It’s] so haunting to people. What interested us is a man who believes he has the luck, who thinks he's going to live forever, facing his death,” said Landau in a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* interview. The pair researched the Floyd Collins story for about a year, during which they traveled to Kentucky to explore caves and their surrounding areas, experience hill music, and even interview some of Floyd’s distant relatives. Initially, Landau and Guettel wanted to write *Floyd Collins* in a way that concisely covered every historical detail of the rescue attempt at Sand Cave. However, when faced with four different ways to tell the story, the two opted instead to focus on the title character himself. Says Guettel in the same interview on his and Landau’s creative process: “We were true to the spirit of the story, but not the letter…and true to the spirit of the [Kentucky folk] music, but not to the notes.” Thus, Landau and Guettel’s musical was aptly titled “Floyd Collins” because the focus shifted from telling the complete story of the rescue attempt to exploring and expounding upon the thematic elements such as of faith and glory through the lens of the unfortunate cave explorer.

When the Floyd Collins’ story first broke to the local and later national media it became the biggest story of 1925, knocking coverage of the Alaskan diphtheria epidemic, President Coolidge’s laissez-faire economic policies, and boxing great Jack Dempsey’s possible retirement off the front pages of newspapers everywhere. Floyd Collins, a virtually unknown thirty-seven year old cave explorer from rural Kentucky with only a fifth grade education, soon became a household name. Throughout the ordeal virtually every American who wanted to stay up-to-date with news coming out of Cave City got their information from yellow journalists, who sensationalized and falsified
stories to gain attention and revenue. Some of the headlines printed during the Floyd Collins rescue attempt were quite exaggerated, such as in the Nashville Tennessean: “Dog To Be Sent With Food To Collins Cave.” Other yellow journalists concocted various conspiracy theories about Floyd’s entrapment and even blamed William Burke “Skeets” Miller in an Evening Post exclusive: “Collins Martyr To Despicable Greed For Fame.” Contrary to the slander, Skeets was awarded a 1926 Pulitzer Prize in journalism for his in-depth and accurate coverage of the rescue attempt and his personal interviews with Floyd.

About fifty-five thousand people from all across Kentucky and beyond flocked to Sand Cave to observe the rescue attempt and hopefully catch a glimpse of Collins being extracted from the cave –alive, dead, or seriously injured. During the “carnival-like” atmosphere vendors and con artists used the influx of people to their advantage and made a fortune selling hot dogs, ice cream, balloons, and other “commemorative” cave-related souvenirs. There were also copious amounts of illegal moonshine present in the crowd, due to Prohibition, and even amongst the rescuers.

The story of Floyd Collins is a retrospective piece of American history that importantly reminds us of the good and bad in human nature, and how reactions to history making and life changing events never truly change. While compassion, courage, and ingenuity can be summoned to aid another human being in turmoil, so too can greed, apathy, and perversion. At the center of it all was a man who was forced to face the bittersweet glory that called to him, and who eventually came to terms with how to answer it.

By Michael Christie, Dramaturg