

# On figuring it out as you go along



Opera singer and director Alek Shrader discusses not being afraid to try new things, merging different interests in your creative work, and the importance of communication in a collaboration.

April 26, 2022 -

As told to J. Bennett, 3192 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Comics](#), [Writing](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

**You're primarily an opera singer and director. You recently adapted the opera *Carmen* into a graphic novel. What led you to this new form of expression?**

I think the biggest thing was opportunity. Arizona Opera was doing this thing they call the OnPitch Business Challenge, which was kind of *Shark Tank* for opera. My sister discovered their ad, and she sent it to me because we come from a family of opera singers. We have a bunch of ideas about doing different things with opera or promoting it in a different way or getting it out to different audiences. We brainstormed a little bit and came to the conclusion that the idea of a graphic novel adaptation would be something that an opera company could achieve as a publisher and as a creator of that content. They could do it within a budget, and they could distribute it to their local audience for people that come to see the opera, or they could take it to conventions, or they could maybe eventually get it for national distribution. The list goes on. I submitted my pitch after I did a bunch of research on the internet, because it was my first time figuring out how comics are made. I was selected as a winner. I think there were about 200 submissions, and I got the green light.

**And, you're a lifelong comics fan.**

That's right. It doesn't hurt that I have thousands of comics at this point, and that number is only growing. I've always been interested in comics and the way those stories are delivered. As far as I know, almost all of the existing opera adaptations are mostly by [my collaborator] [P. Craig Russell](#) himself. A few of the older ones were published by Bailey for the Metropolitan Opera back in the '50s, I believe. They're very expensive now, so I don't have those, but I always felt like it was such a cool way to communicate that story—the operatic drama without the music.

**What do you think drew you to comics initially?**

Oh, the art—absolutely. When you're a kid, you see the superhero stuff and it hooks you. You get into it, and they're so collectible, so you just keep acquiring them as you go. Then, as you get older, you can start appreciating the storylines and the drama and all the ups and downs—the soap opera of it all. One of my best comic book memories is the reveal of Archangel in *X-Factor* 26. I couldn't believe that I owned that. It's my most prized single issue, and it's beat to hell. The cover is torn and detached, and the pages are rolled, but I have that emotional memory of living that—of when that character arrived in that form. It's meaningful to me.

Then, as I got even older, I started preferring more mature storylines and real adult stuff. You didn't have to leave comics to do that. By the time I was looking for that, those stories existed in comics. Some of those

stories were these opera adaptations, which I was already familiar with—being from a household that raised me with opera—but there were all these other grown-up stories and grown-up content that was available in this format, which I was familiar with from early, early childhood. And I'm so happy that I am now a creator. I get to join the ranks of comic book world.

**You're from an opera family, so which came first: comics or singing?**

Comics, absolutely. As a personal choice, like, "What are you going to do with your time?" I'm going to read comics. Meanwhile, my mom and dad were singing operas as performers, so it was just a part of life. It was a part of the house. There was always music going on, and it was usually classical if not specifically opera. Once I got into my later high school years and it was time to start thinking about what I'm going to do with my life—what sort of career path is there for me—music and specifically opera was just a natural choice. It wasn't until then that I really started to devote myself to opera. That came long after my love for comics.

**As you mentioned, this isn't the first time an opera has been adapted to the comics format. Did you draw inspiration from any of the prior adaptations in particular?**

Absolutely, yeah. P. Craig Russell was the guy. He adapted 10 or 11 operas, and they're phenomenal. All of the music is actually there—the music is on the page. That's what I really respected. So when I was going to try to figure out how to do this myself, he was on the top of my list for people that I needed to speak with, to try to figure out what the heck I was going to do now that Arizona Opera was asking me to make this thing.

There are a few other people who have done opera adaptations. Roy Thomas and Gil Kane did a *Ring Cycle* a while ago—I think sometime in the '80s. Then Alex Alice has his stunningly beautiful *Siegfried* trilogy. I have it in English, but I think originally it's in French. It's just gorgeous. So I knew that it could be done. I also knew that I had no idea how to do it myself.

**Why did you choose Carmen for your adaptation?**

Once Arizona gave me the green light and we had to pick an opera, we looked at their list of upcoming productions for their season. *Carmen* was the most famous opera that they felt would appeal to the biggest audience. So that's the practical, short answer, but I think we really got lucky in that *Carmen* has been one of the most popular operas performed worldwide for the last 150 years. So it does come with a natural, existing operatic fan base.

On top of that, the character of *Carmen* is extremely timely. It's still a story that needs to be told today, which is about a young woman who is very sharp-witted and has strong emotions. All she really wants is autonomy and freedom, but she's facing challenges from society and misogyny and men who sexually objectify her and then vilify her. And she takes all of that in stride. Ultimately, she says, "I'm going to let fate decide, but I know that I'm never going to give in to you." So, it's a powerful message. It's a conversation that needs to be had still, even after 150 years.

**When *Carmen* was first performed in Paris in 1875, it caused a bit of a scandal amongst the critics of the day. Was that part of the appeal for you?**

Yeah, for sure. It was shocking. This was in my pitch to Arizona, actually. I brought up the idea that opera is considered highbrow entertainment. It's refined. Comics is considered a little bit lower brow, a little more common. So the idea of an operatic graphic adaptation would be to unite the brows into a unibrow that everyone can appreciate.

And that's kind of what was happening at the premiere of *Carmen*. You had the people who wanted to go see a classy show, but this story is all about outlaws and the rebels of society and the way they live. It's grittier than what opera audiences were used to—especially when the main character—Carmen herself—gets killed onstage. It was a shock, and they weren't ready for that. I think it took about eight years before it came back to Paris. By then, it was a huge sensation and has been going ever since. But initially, yes, it was quite a shock.

**It was also a very early form of genre-mashing within opera, wasn't it?**

That's exactly it. The other thing that *Carmen* did was to evolve the type of content that opera was presenting. We had comic, lighter fare opera, which was based on the Commedia Dell'arte of Italy. It was funny and light-silly stuff. Then you had something called verismo, which was real life and real people and much more dramatic, much more serious. *Carmen* is actually both of those things at once, so people just didn't quite know how to accept it, how to enjoy it. At least not the people of 1875.

**What were some of the challenges you encountered in adapting an opera into a graphic novel?**

Having written a few screenplays, librettos, and stage plays, I felt I was ready to write a script. So I felt prepared, but I was not prepared. I even knew the story very well. Then I really dove into the novella. I made sure I had accurate editions of both versions of the libretto. And I did research, too, which is time consuming, but it's a part that I love—that prep time where you just gather all your resources. But once I got all the information, I had to figure out what a comic book script looks like. I had to figure out what an artist needs from me. So, I bought all of the how-to books—all of them. And the most helpful ones, honestly, in a good way but also in a not-so-helpful way said, "Well, your script can look like anything as long as the artist is getting what they need."

**That's both liberating and extremely frustrating.**

Yes. At that point, I didn't know who my artist would be, but I had to put my information onto these pages. As a director of opera, what I like to have is as much as possible, so that in the moment when we're creating the scene, if something springs to life, if there's an inspiration, we've been given enough parameters that we have that room to create. But I found that, for comic artists—or, specifically my artists, maybe others work differently—I was giving too much information. I was putting too much detail in. I was trying to control the panel layout and just stick my head in where it doesn't belong. Once Craig came on board, which was sent from above—I still don't know how I managed to get him—he really walked me through including the minimum and most important things. What do we need for the page? What is the pacing of this portion of the story? What are the most important beats? Then we can think about panels. How does the panel achieve the beat?

**So his experience was obviously a huge help.**

Absolutely. I threw out my first draft completely and started over. Then, with Craig, I went back through and made sure that we were really doing justice to the story and not getting so caught up in all the little Easter egg crap that I was trying to jam in there—and just really focusing on *Carmen's* journey. It was a challenge. I think the next one will be easier. I think you can say that about anything, though, the first time you do something. But I really couldn't have done it without Craig's guidance. Honestly, he saved my bacon.

**I know from experience that writing tends to be a very solitary pursuit, but you found a mutually beneficial way to collaborate with Craig. How did that work?**

We broke up the opera into three 30-page installments. They were basically act breaks. It was act one, act two and then acts three and four together. I wrote act one with 30 pages in mind, and when Craig saw my first draft he was like, "No, no—don't do this." So for the second draft, I had an idea of the upper limit of panels on a page and how the action should flow and what the big moments were. Then he would get it and look through. He would either email me or call me, or we'd set up a Zoom or something, and we would talk through anything that wasn't clear—or if he had ideas that he wanted to expand on or add his own P. Craig Russell flavor to it.

**It sounds like there was quite a bit of communication, then.**

We would really hash it out together, which was amazing. To be considered an equal partner in this with him was incredible. Once all of his questions were answered or his ideas were considered, he would do layouts and send the layouts back to me. I would take a peek and offer very little feedback because it's all masterful. There were

a couple times when I had a suggestion or a change that I wanted to humbly and politely put forward, and he absolutely took my point of view into account, being the, I guess, the opera guy on this project—although he's an expert in opera himself. He's a great lover of opera, which is why he's the perfect guy for this project.

Then he'd send his layouts to [the illustrator] Aneke, who would finish the art and color. All of her stuff is just spectacular. It's so beautiful. We would both give her notes occasionally, and then her pages would get sent to our letterer Hassan. That's a little bit how-the-sausage-is-made, I guess, but there really was collaboration at every step. It was individual at first, but then we'd share our work and get feedback, make corrections, and then pass the project to the next artist who would follow the same format, do their thing, show everyone else, adjust, and then pass it on.

**You specifically sought out Craig for this project. Is the same true of Aneke and Hassan?**

Yes and no. I was looking for someone like Aneke. I was not familiar with her work specifically, but ... well, Craig and I are dudes. The novella of *Carmen* was written by a guy and the opera was created by three guys. So the thing we were missing was the perspective of a woman to tell the story of this incredible woman, Carmen. When I started recruiting artists, I did not contact men. I really tried to find Spanish, non-male artists because I felt that was another important connection to the culture and the setting of the book. Aneke responded right away and said she was interested, so it was perfect.

As for Hassan, I've subscribed to his industry magazine, PanelxPanel, for quite some time. That's just as a comic book enthusiast. It's got some insider interviews and analysis—it's a really cool magazine. One day on Twitter, he put out a call for interesting projects because he had some time in his schedule. And man, I DM'd him so fast. I said, "Please, we have this cool thing. It's an opera adaptation. P. Craig Russell is on it. Do you want to be on it, too?" He emailed me and that was it. We had the team.

**I want to go back to something you said earlier about Craig being an opera fan. That's interesting in the sense that you guys were able to speak two different languages together—the language of comics and the language of opera. I imagine that was pretty helpful in streamlining the process.**

Yeah, that's a great way to put it. There's two different languages that we both speak. I think he would agree that my primary thing was opera, but I spoke a little comics. And he speaks mostly comics and a lot of opera. So we could communicate in ways that I don't think I would have been able to with other artists. He already knew so much about the way the music communicates, and he could put that into his layouts. I could ask another artist to listen to the opera, but if they weren't already dedicated to that form of expression, then we would be starting from scratch. And Craig is very clearly dedicated to the art form that is opera. We could get really nerdy with each other about the musical analysis and how we wanted to put that into a visual format for our adaptation.

Writing something is hard and scary, but communication is key, right? Communication is the whole thing, and it's so wild to think that even within this specific story, this one story that we're all trying to communicate, there's so many different ways to communicate with each other about what we feel or how we interpret this moment, this beat, so that we can unify into a single message, a single mode of communication for the consumer. It's wild. To circle back to the how-to books, this is what they were talking about. There's no wrong way to do it, as long as you're communicating in a way that works for your collaborators.

**What have you learned from the experience of creating this book?**

I've learned that it's super fulfilling to finish a project. On a personal level, this has been like a dream come true. I'm just so grateful that somehow the stars aligned, and I got to work with the artists that I'm working with. I'm so happy with the book. I'm so excited to show people what we made.

On a bigger level, I think it's really worthy work that we're doing. I think that we are expanding the reaches of this little niche opera experience to a much wider audience. We're trying to get this book into the hands of the readers who prefer graphic novels to prose, who would maybe feel like they're not invited to come to the opera, that maybe opera's not for them. It is for them, actually. Like I said before, this story is so current. It's so

important.

On top of that, the music is gorgeous, so come and check it out, but before you do that, you can get familiar with it in this graphic novel. You can use it as a gateway to invite yourself to the opera. I think that's been an ongoing struggle for opera in general: How can we convince people that this is worth their time or that they might really like this? I don't think that it's dragging people against their will. I think we have to invite them.

**Alek Shrader Recommends:**

*The Human Target* (King/Smallwood) & *Mister Miracle* (King/Gerads) I have two number ones. I'm not sorry! Human Target is halfway finished and it's great. Art, story, greatness. Mister Miracle made me a diehard Tom King reader. "Standing"—I say that to myself a lot.

*Ted Lasso*. The show makes me happy. It restores my faith in humanity. I know it's fictional! I find it deeply inspiring.

*Coco*. This movie makes me cry. And I cry more with every viewing. What a testament to communication through music. Masterful. I'm crying now.

Go to the opera (any opera)! Tell them I sent you. Tell them you're taking over. It's your opera house now.

Go outside and move around. Breathe deeply! Enjoy being alive. Fill up and let go. Now do the next thing.

Name

Alek Shrader

Vocation

opera singer, director, screenwriter

□