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Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical

Book By: Melvin Tunstall III

Lyrics By: Douglas Lyons

Music By: Greg Borowsky & Douglas Lyons

Based on an original concept by Douglas Lyons

**Produced by The Public Theatre - Lewiston, Maine
May 2023**

An Audience Guide

By Jazzmin Bonner

The Authors

Melvin Tunstall III is an American writer and actor. He studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and participated in the Yale Institute for Musical Theatre. He began writing while studying at Cincinnati, but took a small break to make his Broadway debut in ***Beautiful: The Carole King Musical***. When Tunstall returned to writing, he was commissioned to adapt Broadway musicals ***Wonderland*** and ***The Wiz***. His original musical ***Bloom!*** was a finalist in the NAMT Festival in New York City. Best known for ***Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical***, which won the Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Family Show in 2018, Tunstall writes his own musicals as well as commissioned pieces.

Douglas Lyons is an actor, writer, director, composer-lyricist, and playwright. He served as a writer & composer on Apple TV's 2022 series ***Fraggle Rock***. Douglas received a GLAAD nomination for his Broadway playwriting debut, ***Chicken and Biscuits***. His music and lyrics have been featured on BET Plus, CBS's Sunday Morning Show, Carnegie Hall's Voices of Hope Festival, and Lincoln Center's Broadway Songbook Series. As an actor, he's appeared on Broadway in ***The Book of Mormon*** and ***Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*** (Original Cast), as well as the tours of ***Rent*** and ***Dreamgirls***. Other theater writing credits include: ***Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical*** (Off-Broadway Alliance Winner Best Family Show, Atlantic Theater Company), ***Beau*** (Adirondack Theatre Festival) and ***Five Points*** currently in development with ***Hamilton's*** Andy Blankenbuehler. With musical writing partner Ethan D. Pakchar, Douglas is a 2020 Jonathan Larson Grant finalist.

Greg Borowsky is a songwriter and producer from South Africa, He is the producer and writer behind some of South Africa's biggest award-winning artists. He is known for co-writing and producing "20 Years of Freedom," a song for the South African government. Borowsky moved to New York City to complete the production of "The Greg Dean Project," which featured soul and Broadway artists and topped the UK Soul Chart and the USA Billboard R&B chart. Borowsky wrote the music for ***Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical***, which won the Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Family Show in 2018.

The Setting

The action of ***Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical*** takes place in the town of Rockaway. Although we're not given geographical context to where Rockaway is we can assume that it takes place in a town where the majority of the population is one Race or Ethnicity. Inspired by the remarkable stories of the Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges it is very likely that the action is either in the Midwest or the South.

The writers of this musical focused the action of this play on the two most important places where a child can receive an education - home and school. At Rockaway Elementary School the action of the play moves between the classroom, the lunchroom and the playground.

Each of these locations is anchored by simple set pieces to keep the shifts between scenes dynamic and seamless as we move through the story. The classroom is indicated by the students and their desks. The lunchroom space is suggested by the lunch trays and the tables where they sit. The playground is marked very strongly by the Square Sprinkler and the Polkadot Pump. In the Square home we join the family for dinner around their kitchen table. All of these spaces are shown very simplistically but with strong recognizable elements that ground us in place while allowing the story to flow from the characters

The Plot

The alarm goes off and the lights come up on Penelope Square in bed. She's been waiting for the first day of school all summer. She needs to get up and get dressed and ready for the first day of school. She is excited even though she will be repeating the same grade. We meet Sky Square, Penelope's younger brother who is shoved out of the bathroom with his towel. He is excited for the first day of school, and as he begins to get dressed, he wonders why he isn't an only child and why his sister is so loud. The scene transitions and we are in Rockaway Elementary School. We meet Ms. Square who is preparing the classroom for the first day and a new start. She's very excited to be welcoming new minds. Students start walking into her classroom. The action freezes on stage as Lily Polkadot enters the stage. She is more nervous about her first day of school because she knows that she's entering a school where she is going to be different from everybody else. But all the same, she's optimistic that she will make a new friend. As Lily exits off stage, Miss Square, Penelope Square, and Sky Square continue to sing about being excited for the first day of school as we transition into Ms. Square's classroom. The class roll is being called until we realize that Penelope Square is not in the classroom. As Ms. Square questions Sky about the whereabouts of his older sister, Sky mentions that he has not seen his sister since they got off the bus but that she should be able to find the class because she is repeating the grade.

Penelope enters chatting loudly on the phone as Ms. Square begins to reprimand her for being late. Penelope retorts that she doesn't need the announcement repeated because she was in the same class last year. Ms. Square begins to make a special announcement which Penelope interrupts believing it is going to be about Share Day, which they did last year. Ms. Square says that they are doing something different this year - but more importantly, there is another special announcement. Just as Ms. Square and Penelope are arguing about whether a Square Dance is better than Share Day, there is a knock on the door. Ms. Square preps the class that they are going to see a new student. She opens the door to reveal Lily Polkadot. The students are all shocked. Penelope immediately points out how different Lily is with her polka dots and how only Squares go to Rockaway. As Ms. Square attempts to welcome Lily and find her a seat in the classroom, Penelope throws a temper tantrum and leaves the classroom. As Lily cautiously takes her seat, Sky notices her and reassures her that Penelope is only being mean because she is bigger. Lily says that she was prepared for the meanness and that she is used to dealing with Squares, Triangles, and Ovals. Sky is amazed that those things are real.

At Recess, Lily enters the playground when a dodgeball comes flying in and hits her. The dodgeball belongs to Penelope Square. Penelope becomes very excited that she has discovered a game called Dot Ball, where everyone can throw balls at Lily's dots. Sky steps in to stand up for Lily and threatens to tell Ms. Square about Penelope's cruel game. Penelope backs down, leaving to plot another plan against Lily. Sky asks Lily how she's able to stand up to Penelope. Lily explains that Penelope is yelling and trying to make herself seem scarier because Penelope is scared.

Ms. Square enters bringing along the Polkadot Pump and places it next to the Square Sprinkler. Lily questions and asks why she cannot drink from the Square Sprinkler. It is made clear that only Squares can drink from that water fountain. Lily asks if the water fountains are different from each other, and Ms. Square confesses that she doesn't know - she's never drank from a Polkadot Pump before. Lily offers for her to taste the water, and Ms. Square explains it's not as simple as just tasting the water. Lily offers to taste the water from the Square Sprinkler and Ms. Square impresses upon her that she should never drink from the Square Sprinkler and that they have done everything to make her comfortable within the school, and now she has to make others comfortable with her presence by following the rules that have been put in place. Lily, feeling sad, wishes aloud she could just scrub away her spots and paint on some squares, just so she could make one friend. Having one friend would make the stares and the teasing and laughing seem less harsh.

The next scene opens up on the Square household. The family is sitting down for dinner where they are having cube steak, but not before they say the Square motto: they proclaim that they're proud to live as Squares and the world's better because they're there. They think they're elite and everyone bows at their feet - they're lucky to be born Squares. As they begin to eat their dinner, Mama Square asks how their first day of school went. Penelope hints that Sky has made a new friend - he is immediately embarrassed but Mama Square says it's perfectly normal to like a new girl. Sky explains she is just a friend. Penelope puts gas in the fire by suggesting that they have Sky's new friend over for dinner. Upon learning that she is a Polkadot, his mother retracts the invitation for dinner and quickly leaves the table.

Sky is left confused by his mother's reaction and Penelope clarifies, saying that Squares and Polkadots shouldn't eat together, that a Polkadot shouldn't even be at Rockaway, and Polkadots are gross. Penelope leaves Sky at the table by himself. Sky thinks to himself how beautiful he finds Lily's dots and spots and doesn't care how different her skin is from his. He believes she's beautiful and perfect even though he's not allowed to share those feelings and thoughts with other people. He hopes that Lily stays the way she is - beautiful and unique.

The next day Lily wanders into the lunchroom looking for a place to sit. She approaches Sky and he offers her his table. He gets up to leave, but in a moment of curiosity, he turns back to Lily and asks if her dots hurt. Lily laughs and they begin their first conversation. Sky asks if she's enjoying her time at Rockaway. Lily says she feels like it's okay, and she's trying to give it time to make friends.

Sky reflects on how he has never had a girl who is a friend, and Lily teases him about having a girlfriend. He becomes embarrassed and runs off, but Lily tries to run after him. Penelope bumps into Lily and warns her to stay away from Sky. Penelope tells Lily that she's ruining their lives and that she should go back to where she came from. Ms. Square enters and finds Lily very upset. Lily is feeling as though she tried to settle in but recognizes that no one wants her there and wants to go home. Ms. Square shares with Lily that she was the first female teacher at Rockaway. She tells Lily that being the first to enter a new space means that you are special and have been placed in the right spot to change the world. Lily asks what do you do when people are mean to you and Ms. Square says that you keep trying and be yourself. One day you will get to welcome somebody else who's the first, and at that moment you're so glad that you didn't give up. Lily runs off to find Sky and hopes that they can become friends after she goofed up earlier. Penelope enters to speak with Ms. Square about how she thinks that Lily needs to leave the school. Ms. Square asks Penelope why she's not being nice to Lily. Penelope responds that Lily is just different for having spots all over her skin and she doesn't need another reason - Lily just doesn't belong here. Penelope runs off the stage in search of her brother.

We find Sky Square at the playground on a bench sitting alone. The Polkadot Pump and the Square Sprinkler are next to each other on stage. Lily walks onto the playground and Sky exclaims that he does not want a girlfriend! Lily responds that she doesn't want a boyfriend, but just a friend. Sky is unsure that he can be friends with Lily because she doesn't have any squares. Lily asks Sky to close his eyes and pretend that she has squares all over.

She does the same and pretends that Sky has polka dots. As they begin to ask each other questions they realize that they have so much in common and even their differences are things they actually like about each other. Sky drinks from the Square Sprinkler and Lily asks what it tastes like. Sky says "water." He offers Lily a chance to try but Lily says that she's not allowed to. Sky promises he won't tell. They switch places and taste the water from each other's water fountain, realizing that they taste the same, and they laugh. Penelope runs up onto the playground looking for Sky. Sky makes up a story that Lily was helping him find his glasses. Penelope grabs Sky by the arm and escorts him back to the lunchroom, leaving Lily behind. Lily is so excited she has found her one friend.

Ms. Square enters after Lily with a permission slip for the Square Dance. Lily didn't think that she could attend because she's not a Square, but Ms. Square assures her she is welcome. Lily is very excited because she loves to dance, making this the best school day ever! She hugs Ms. Square in celebration. Penelope enters and asks Ms. Square if she's scared of getting cooties. Ms. Square reprimands her, and then Lily retorts that she's already had her cootie shot so she's all set. Lily and Sky share a joke and Penelope retorts that they should probably share jokes on Share Day on Friday. Ms. Square reminds Penelope that Friday is the Square Dance and not Share Day. Penelope presents Ms. Square with a petition to bring back Share Day, for which she has collected signatures. Ms. Square applauds Penelope for finding a mature solution to express her dislike of things changing. She offers an option to embrace the old with the new and would allow Penelope to share a song at the dance. Ms. Square offers Lily the option to teach the group one of her Polkadot dances on Friday. She eagerly agrees and asks Sky if he'll dance with her on Friday. Sky says he can't dance, because dancing is for girls - that is what Penelope told him. Lily says dancing is for everybody - boys dance all the time! Sky is hesitant - he's scared that he'll get in trouble for dancing with Lily. Lily understands his fear and Sky apologizes for people being unkind to her. Lily says that Sky is nice to her and that's enough. Then Sky has an idea . . .

We arrive at the school dance! Ms. Square is emceeing the talent portion of the evening and introduces the first act of the evening, Penelope Square, who sings for us "Cool Kid." Penelope finishes her song and looks for Lily, because she is, "the one person who needed to hear the song." Penelope sulks off the stage when she doesn't see Lily. Ms. Square then receives a note from Sky and Lily, that they are going to teach the group a new dance. Sky comes on stage to reveal that he has painted dots inside of his squares, and tonight he will be "Squot." Lily comes on stage and reveals that she has painted squares inside her dots, tonight she is "Dare." Penelope immediately protests at the sight of this because Lily is not a real Square and Sky is not a Polkadot. Ms. Square gives them a chance to explain.

Sky argues that it's what's inside that counts. Ms. Square recognizes that there are rules, to which Sky confesses that he tried water from the Polkadot pump, and they are the same!

In a moment of shock, Penelope remarks that's how Sky must have gotten his spots. Lily corrects Penelope and shares that she drew on her squares, to remember that while they may be different on the outside, they are the same on the inside. Ms. Square feels that is a valuable lesson for everyone to learn. Lily and Sky begin to teach the new dance they created: the "Squa-dot," and invite everyone to join in the fun. Although reluctant, Penelope soon finds herself joining in on the fun. Penelope brings Lily a glass of water at the end of the dance and compliments her. Lily says that she could not have done it without Sky. Penelope and Lily become friends, and we see Ms. Square rolling the Polkadot Pump away. Lily can now drink from the Square Sprinkler.

The final scene of the musical brings us back to where we began, in the classroom. Sky shares tips and tricks for his favorite video game, "Magic Thunder," with Lily. Penelope arrives on time for class and the bell rings on a new day. Ms. Square reveals that there is a new student joining their class, Tracy Triangle. There is a moment of stillness as the students take in this new student. Then an eruption of "Welcome!" from Lily, Sky, and even Penelope. Ms. Square looks on proudly at her students for all they have learned.

The Characters

Lily Polkadot:

Lily Polkadot is our heroine; she enters Rockaway Elementary School fully knowing that she will be the only Polkadot present in the school, but she is optimistic about the opportunity. Lily is a diplomat - she leads with kindness in her interactions with everyone. Additionally, she recognizes when she's made mistakes and graciously apologizes - like when she bumps into Penelope in the lunchroom. We see the way that Lily chooses to respond to Penelope - never making personal jabs at her, never sinking to her level of cruelty, but recognizing that Penelope's behavior comes from a place of fear, while also recognizing that she can't be afraid of someone who's afraid of her.

Lily puts on her bravest face, but we see her start to doubt herself during her time at Rockaway. Although she is resilient and lighthearted, she combats feeling out of place. She is not a quitter and has come to make a difference by going to school at Rockaway. She is a problem solver who sets herself a goal to make one friend. Becoming friends with Sky Square gives her all the confidence and energy she needs to continue her journey as a Polkadot in a Square world. Lily doesn't stop there. She teaches Sky and those around her that, much like the water fountains, they are all the same on the inside.

Sky Square:

Sky Square undergoes the greatest transformation of all of our characters. When we first meet Sky, he is a shy soft-spoken Square who is going with the flow until he sees Lily. Upon meeting someone who is different from him Sky becomes incredibly curious about her and all the things that make her different. While he tussles with whether or not he is supposed to be friends with someone as different as she is he discovers the similarities between Lily and himself, like their sense of humor. That allows him to be brave and take risks like trying the Polkadot Pump even though it is against the rules. He creates a dance with Lily even though he has been told that boys don't dance. By the end of the play, Sky is able to stand up to his older sister, Penelope, for bullying Lily, speak up to Ms. Square and his classmates about seeing people for who they are on the inside, and welcome their brand-new student with open arms without being concerned about whether or not a Square is supposed to be friends with a Polkadot or a Triangle.

Penelope Square:

Penelope Square is a popular girl who loves school, ritual, and tradition. She struggles with change so much that she's repeating a grade. From the moment she walks in, she expects things to go the way they have always gone and is confronted with a change in the form of a human being. When Penelope meets Lily, she makes it a point to let her know that she doesn't belong. She has learned that type of behavior is acceptable through the values she's taught at home. The Square family believes that Rockaway is for Squares only, and that others do not belong.

Throughout the play we see Penelope having several outbursts toward Lily, trying to make her feel as uncomfortable as possible in this new space; almost as if it were a game to her to see how long it takes to break Lily Polkadot. Additionally, we see Penelope as a protector to her younger brother Sky, who she believes will be forever changed by interacting with Lily Polkadot. We see the dynamics of an older sister trying to protect her brother, by being a bully toward someone she has been taught is truly dangerous.

Penelope begins to give Lily a chance after she witnesses how Lily's friendship has changed her brother Sky for the better. He has become brave enough to stand up for what he believes in. Penelope truly has a change of heart at the dance and begins to treat Lily with kindness. We see in the final scene that Penelope has learned to embrace what is new with open arms.

Ms. Square:

Upon meeting Ms. Square, she is presented to us as an ally to Lily in her adjustment into this new world. She maintains order in the classroom and takes the time to educate Lily on the way that things are done in the Square community. Initially, we see her working to uphold those rules by stating that this is just the way things are, and Lily should be working to not only understand the rules and customs of the town but provide people with comfort in her presence.

As Lily continues to struggle with fitting in and making friends, it is revealed that Ms. Square is a trailblazer. She has sat in the same position that Lily is in right now, as she was the first female teacher at Rockaway. She understands what it means to question the status quo and to make room for people who are a little bit different. We start to see Ms. Square understand where Lily is coming from in her questioning of the rules and begins to let those questions sit, reflecting on how they affect her values. In an attempt to make space for Lily to share a bit of herself with the larger Square community at the Square Dance, Ms. Square invites Lily to teach a dance to the group, showing that she's willing to change the way she engages the other students with Lily's culture.

By the end of the play, Ms. Square doesn't fully understand everything about Polkadot culture but has fully embraced the idea of Lily and Sky's friendship. Their new dance shows creativity and collaboration across cultures, ending in a wonderful show of integration into Rockaway Elementary. By rolling away the Polkadot Pump, Ms. Square signifies that the space is not separate but equal, and we are integrating into one community for learning and engagement.

Mama Square:

Although Mama Square is only in a few scenes, she plays a crucial role in indicating to us, the audience, what the values and rules are within the Rockaway community and how those values are not only taught at home but enforced. After the first day of school, we see her, as any dutiful mother would, checking in with her children and taking an interest in their day. At dinner, she leads them in reciting the Square Motto, making sure that they understand their value and their place in society. It is in this song that we learn how Squares truly view their place in the world.

This is further exemplified in her conversation with Penelope and Sky, and Sky's interest in a potential friendship with Lily. Toward the end of the conversation, we see Mama Square nervously leaving the conversation. We see the rules are meant to hold up Square superiority, and that the idea of being challenged strikes fear in Mama Square.

The Themes

The writers of this musical make it no secret that *Polkadots* is about celebrating diversity and how our differences make us wonderful, powerful, and strong. Sky and Lily's friendship is a celebration of diversity - that is a theme that keeps coming up over and over again within this play. How sometimes being the first to do something differently means that you're making way for others to celebrate their differences as well. We see that in the conversation that Ms. Square has with Lily about how she herself was the first female teacher at Rockaway Elementary, and how staying there despite not being wanted, allowed her to be the teacher to welcome Lily into Rockaway Elementary.

While Lily is certainly a resilient individual, the consistent feeling of not being accepted or wanted in her school and larger community takes a toll on her. The friendship she forms with Sky Square is important to her ability to remain strong. Friendship is a powerful tool in our darkest days. When she feels as though she cannot take

another step, Sky helps Lily recognize all the wonderful things about herself, allowing her to feel as though she can still weather the storm of feeling like an unwanted outsider in a new place. Similarly, Sky has trouble standing up for himself when it comes to his sister, his family, and the expectations of his community. Lily helps him feel brave enough to voice his own opinions and beliefs.

Polkadots is inspired by the trailblazing endeavors of both Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine. In 1957, the Little Rock Nine became the first students to integrate into an all-white public school in Little Rock, Arkansas. This was a test of the Supreme Court decision that was handed down from *Brown vs Board of Education*, which ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional and that all public schools within the United States of America needed to integrate "with all deliberate speed." Lily's integration into Rockaway most resembles the brave actions of Ruby Bridges. In 1960 six-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first Black child to integrate into an all-white public school in New Orleans. Following in the footsteps of the Little Rock Nine who came before her, Ruby persisted in her studies, and faced a lot of verbal and mental abuse for her very presence. But her persistence and bravery paved the way for others.

Questions for Discussion

1. The title of the play is "Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical." What is a cool kid?
2. The friendship between Sky Square and Lily Polkadot is a great example of how our friends make us strong. Can you think of a time when a friend was able to help you through a difficult time with their friendship?
3. This play is inspired by the events of Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges. How does Lily's journey in the play relate to the stories of the Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges?
4. In every culture, there is music and dance. What is the importance of Lily and Sky creating their new dance, the "Squa-dot"?
5. At the end of the musical, a new character is introduced who is a Triangle. Do we think that they will face the same hardship entering a Square-only school as Lily did? What lessons have the Squares at Rockaway Elementary learned?
6. Which character do you sympathize with the most? Why?
7. Mrs. Square shares her own story with Lily about her being the first female teacher in the school. Do you have people in your life who have been the first to try something new?