

The German Legend of Kaspar Hauser Invades the Flea Theater

By [Rob Weinert-Kendt](#)

Tuesday, February 10th 2009 at 3:41pm

Emily Peet-Lukes



Courtney and Swados try to follow up Herzog and Handke.

In a musical, characters break into song at the point where mere speech can't match the size or heat of their feelings. And though operas pair each word with a note, their soaring arias typically stand out from the pedestrian plod of recitative.

Elizabeth Swados doesn't like to acknowledge these divisions. Instead, the work of this American original—a composer who typically directs her own shows, including *Kaspar Hauser: a foundling's opera*, starting this Friday at the Flea—aims for a rolling, nearly nonstop theatrical intensity. It was discernible in the youthful *The Runaways*, Swados's unlikely 1978 Broadway hit, created from interviews with troubled teens. And it was there in *Jabu*, her mashup of Alfred Jarry's life story with his most enduring play, *Ubu Roi*, which ran at the Flea in 2005.

She's after an onstage world, in short, where music is the language.

"I hate musical theater," says Swados after a rehearsal with *Kaspar Hauser's* enthusiastic cast of 19. "And I don't believe in recitative. I once set the 'Who's on First?' routine to music, to figure out how to set dialogue to music so it doesn't sound like recitative."

This sung-through aesthetic, though, can make Swados susceptible to the *Amadeus* disease: too many notes. She remembers a composition professor who turned "purple" trying to play one of her student pieces: "You didn't put in any rests—there was nowhere to breathe," he told her. After an early workshop of *Kaspar Hauser*, the Flea's producing director, Carol Ostrow, gave Swados similarly bad news.

"She called me into her office and said, 'A lot happens, but there's no story,' " recalls Swados. "I was furious. But then I realized she was right. So we had to find someone to help me shape it."

The Flea brought in playwright Erin Courtney (*Mother's Couch, Owls, Demon Baby*), whose economical style seemed a good counterweight to Swados's kitchen-sink approach. "She totally *knew* the story," says Courtney. "But she had, I'd say, almost 100 songs. So first I listened to as much of it as I could and picked the grounding points—the songs we could not let go of—and those were the anchors."

The story Courtney helped shape is based on the iconic tale of a feral child from early-19th-century Germany. Hauser emerged nearly mute from apparent captivity in a dungeon, and efforts to determine his parentage were inconclusive. After he was mysteriously murdered, rumors that he was the hereditary prince of Baden, replaced at birth by an impostor, blossomed into a legend worthy of Anastasia's.

The story inspired Werner Herzog's brooding film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* and playwright Peter Handke's meta-linguistic fantasia *Kaspar*. Though the original facts have been endlessly debated, Swados and Courtney embraced the portrait etched in Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's 1997 book *The Wild Child*: that of Kaspar as a young innocent—possibly usurped—who was manipulated by his would-be benefactors.

The story's real theatrical gold, though, is the opportunity to depict a pre-verbal shut-in as his senses awaken.

"I love the sound of things," Swados avers. "If two people are arguing on the street, I'm more interested in how they're shouting at each other than what they're saying. So it was so appealing to me to write songs for somebody who can't talk."

Courtney's Pinteresque aesthetic jibes well with this aural orientation. "I don't write very talky plays," she says. "I'm interested in the rhythm and the silence of language." Though she had to be coaxed into writing lyrics, Courtney soon grasped what music brings.

"As a playwright, you try as much as you can to make a visceral punch," Courtney says. "You try to use visual and physical language. But music takes it to a different, deeper level."