

Floyd Collins

From Sand Cave to the Stage

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The year was 2014. I, the nerdiest 16-year-old alive, was driving to school, bopping along to Audra McDonald's solo album, *How Glory Goes*. I began to gravitate towards a particular song on the album, the title track, "How Glory Goes." I was struck with its beauty- the haunting melody, the lush orchestrations, and the contemplative and poetic lyrics.

This led to me to conducting some research, and I eventually stumbled upon the source of the song: Adam Guettel and Tina Landau's musical, *Floyd Collins*. *Floyd Collins* tells the true story of a cave spelunker of the same name, who, in January 1925, found himself trapped 150 feet underground in a cave he had been exploring. After a massive media circus and an attempted rescue mission lasting over two weeks, rescuers reached the spot where Collins was trapped, though he had passed away just days prior.

Early 20th Century cave spelunkers and folk/bluegrass music were certainly not aspects of American culture that I was interested in during my high school years. However, something about the show hypnotized me. I could not really put my finger on what it was, but I knew that to me, *Floyd Collins* was and would continue to be an incredibly special work of theatre. Throughout my junior year of high school, my morning commute ritual of bopping to Audra McDonald's greatest hits became my morning commute ritual of bopping to *Floyd Collins*. Soon, I knew every lyric and every melody to every song. I was truly obsessed. I decided to sing "How Glory Goes" in my musical theatre class, and though my rendition was mediocre, my passion for *Floyd Collins* continued to grow. Time passed, and by the end of high school, I was more invested in *Floyd Collins* than ever before. I had recently committed to Elon's Music Theatre program, as well as the Elon College Fellows program, and even then I knew that I wanted to conduct my Fellows research on *Floyd Collins*.

Two and a half years later, I am currently deep into my Fellows research on *Floyd Collins*. As my research has progressed, I have gained a deeper understanding of why I am so drawn to this show in particular. To put it simply, what engages me the most about *Floyd Collins* is its honesty. In a literal sense, the musical is remarkably loyal to the true story of Floyd Collins, with the exception of a few characters being combined and some details of the two-week fiasco being left out. I appreciate this greatly, as Guettel and Landau were able to take a story that most people would never think of as musical-material, and accurately craft it into a cohesive, compelling piece of theatre. In terms of the writing, much of the show's honesty appears in the libretto, featuring Tina Landau's book and Adam Guettel's lyrics.

The musical takes place in 1920s Barren County, KY, an impoverished, rural area. Therefore, most of the characters are not highly educated and do not have the vocabulary to express deeply intellectual thoughts. In order to remain honest to these given circumstances, Guettel focuses his lyrics on the emotional experiences of the characters. As theatrical scholar Scott Miller states in the *Floyd Collins* chapter of his book, *Rebels With Applause*, "This is not a show about people who think too much – that's Sondheim's territory – this is a show about hope ('The Call,' 'Lucky'), fear ('I Landed on Him'), memory ('Daybreak,' 'The Riddle Song'), anger ('Git Comfortable') love ('Heart an' Hand,' 'Through the Mountain'), and faith ('How Glory Goes')" (Miller 168). In the lyrics and dialogue, Landau and Guettel are able to use language that is truthful to the characters' simplicity, while still revealing an exceptional amount of information about the characters' relationships, passions, and values.

Perhaps the most honest piece of *Floyd Collins*, however, is Adam Guettel's score. Somehow, Guettel has successfully crafted a cohesive score for the musical stage that combines elements of classical musical, theatrical music, and most importantly, folk/bluegrass music.

Guettel uses these highly contrasting musical genres to differentiate between Floyd's world down in the cave, and the world of the rescue mission on the surface. As Scott Miller describes, "The music of the world above ground is a fairly authentic recreation of 1920s Kentucky bluegrass, its rhythms, its forms, and its instrumentation. The music of Floyd's world beneath the ground is in Guettel's own quirky, far more sophisticated musical language..." (177). Guettel's own "musical language" is heavily inspired by classical music, combined with nods to his musical theatre predecessors, including the legendary Stephen Sondheim. It can best be described as vibrant, ethereal, and eccentric, which accentuates Floyd's imaginative, adventurous, but also rapidly deteriorating mental state. While this style is a stark contrast to the bluegrass music from the world above, Guettel is able to fuse these styles together to create a highly cohesive score that is capable of telling a compelling musical story. Through his wise use of style, Guettel is able to remain true to the honest, emotional stories that exist above ground *and* below the surface.

Based on true events, as well as Robert K. Murray and Roger W. Brucker's book, *Trapped!: The Story of Floyd Collins*, the first reading of the musical *Floyd Collins* was conducted in Adam Guettel's living room in 1992. The show barely resembled its current form, but after some hefty revisions, the first official production of *Floyd Collins* premiered in 1994 at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia, PA. Two years later, the show opened Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in New York City, where it ran for 25 performances. Led by *Les Miserables* alumnus Christopher Innvar as Floyd, the production also featured Martin Moran as Skeets Miller, Jason Danieley as Homer Collins, Theresa McCarthy as Nellie Collins, as well as a young Brian d'Arcy James in the cameo role of Cliff Roney. The production was directed by Landau, and although it was not a major commercial success, it was awarded the prestigious Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Musical, as well as an Obie Award for Guettel's score.

According to Scott Miller, “Stephen Sondheim said during a visit to St. Louis in 1999 that he considered *Floyd Collins* the best musical written in the last twenty-five years” (Miller 159). If that’s not high praise, I’m not sure what is.

Due to its relative obscurity, *Floyd Collins* is rarely produced, though there have been a handful of significant productions, including at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre and a 2003 reunion production at Playwrights Horizons, starring Broadway veteran Romain Frugé in the titular role.

Floyd Collins is divided into three parts: The Cave, The Rescue, and The Carnival, each portraying a different aspect of the story. Prior to “The Cave,” however, the show opens with a brief prologue, in which “The Ballad of Floyd Collins” is introduced for the first time. This song, sung by the locals, is Guettel’s version of the song, “The Death of Floyd Collins,” a 1920s bluegrass song that was recorded just after the real Collins’ death, and became a national hit. Not only does Guettel’s version of the song set the scene musically, featuring a bluegrass style and instrumentation, but the lyrics also serve as an introduction to the audience. From this song, the audience learns that a man named Floyd Collins will become trapped in an underground cave, and that he will ignore prior dreams warning him of this very tragedy. The song ends with the lyric: “Went lookin’ fer his fortune under the ground... Sure enough his fortune is what he found.”

Not only does this lyric foreshadow Floyd’s death by twisting the meaning of the word “fortune,” but it also suggests the importance of what was occurring in this region of Kentucky at the time: the Cave Wars. During the 1920s, many poor farmers were desperate to find a remarkable cave on their property, one that would bring in tourists, and therefore, monetary profit. This led to bitter competition between landowners in order to find the cave that would attract the most visitors. When the company sings, “Went lookin’ fer his fortune under the ground...” they are referring to

Floyd's desire to discover a cave that will earn him a fortune financially and, as we will soon learn, personally.

The prologue ends, and "The Cave" begins. We see Floyd alone on stage, setting out underground to find a cave in the song, "The Call." During the introduction of this song, Floyd exclaims, "This cavern's gonna be the biggest attraction in these parts, an' this time, folks'll pay me to tour her wonders! They'll be tearin' up the mountain. They'll be campin' in the snow!" While the audience does not know this yet, Floyd has successfully predicted the future. The cave will soon become one of the biggest attractions in the *country*, with people traveling hundreds of miles to "tear up the mountain" and "camp in the snow." However, it will not be because of its beauty—it will be because of Floyd's entrapment.

The song begins, and we quickly learn of Floyd's passion for cave exploring, as well as his intense desire for "glory." At this point, it is unclear exactly what this "glory" means to Floyd, though the lyrics suggest that fame and money have something to do with it. Throughout the song, Floyd mentions that he wants to avoid farming, "No more plowin' a hardscrabble field; I jes' know, I jes' know it's my lucky day," as well as build a better life for his family:

So Papa, so you see—
I ain't a crazy cavin' fool, you see!
I always promised to do you right
An' by the time I get home tonight
All our money worries will be gone;
We will be dreamin' on
You see I'll set you up on a valley farm
Where you can nap under apple trees

Put up your feet instead of kickin' my ass!

Clearly, Floyd cares deeply about his family, and wants to use his soon-to-be “glory” to help them. The theme of family will appear frequently throughout the remainder of the show.

Floyd’s method of finding wide-open spaces in the dark is through yodeling- he yodels into a passageway, and if he hears an echo, he knows that he has discovered a wide open space. So, Floyd yodels into the passageway, and suddenly, we hear an echo, leading into a brilliantly crafted musical yodeling duet between Floyd and his echo. He has reached the cave he has been envisioning, and it is everything he has dreamed of: a wide open space deeply hidden away from the outside world. This echo motif is one of the most important motifs in the show, and it is a prime example of Guettel’s brilliant creativity.

After some time, Floyd begins the journey out of the cave in the song “Time to Go,” in which he excitedly exclaims his plans to open the cave to the public, including:

Some big signs out on the road!

With a ticket office

And a curio shop

And refreshment stand

Open seven days a week!

He is completely beside himself, now sure of the “glory” that is headed his way. He excitedly yodels once more, launching him into an even more elaborate duet with his echo. However, as he attempts to squeeze through a tight passageway, a rock falls from the cave ceiling onto his foot, pinning him to the cave floor. He tries to wiggle himself free, but to no avail- he is truly stuck. Part one, “The Cave,” ends with Floyd contemplating his situation. Confident that he will soon be free, he repeatedly states that he is “lucky,” a term that later connects him to his sister,

Nellie. At the same time, a brief, eerie, minor-sounding melody plays. This melody will later become the “lucky” motif, another example of Floyd’s connection to Nellie.

Part two, “The Rescue,” begins above ground. Ed Bishop, a local caver (and supposed descendant of the legendary caver Stephen Bishop), Jewell Estes, a local teenager, and Bee Doyle, the owner of the farm Floyd had been exploring on, are gathered around discussing Floyd’s predicament. Floyd’s father Lee and younger sister Nellie enter, and the conversation shifts to a debate as to whether farming or caving is a more useful profession. We also are introduced to the fact that Nellie has just returned from a long stay at an “asylum,” and that Homer is in Louisville buying a car.

The debate comes to a climax in the song, “Where a Man Belongs” (which replaced “Tween a Rock an’ a Hard Place” in the original Playwrights Horizons production). While Lee, Miss Jane, and one of the unnamed locals argue that farming is more dependable and useful, Jewell, Bishop, and Doyle argue that caving is a more financially lucrative career. This song sets up two major themes in the show- the conflict between the farmers and the cavers, as well as the locals’ connection to the land.

After the song, Homer arrives at the site, and immediately runs into the cave to try to make it down to where his brother lies. Meanwhile, Nellie and Miss Jane (their stepmother) discuss Floyd’s situation. Miss Jane is deeply concerned, as she tells Nellie that her first husband also died in a cave. Miss Jane is also concerned by the fact that Floyd had recently dreamed of being buried underground by a cave-in. However, Nellie is convinced that Floyd will prevail, as she says, “Floyd’s got the luck.” This is the first time that we are able to clearly witness the supernatural connection that Nellie and Floyd have with one another. Though they have not had any contact since Floyd was trapped underground, their minds are on the same page, both believing in “the

Luck.” This launches Nellie into a song, conveniently named “Lucky.” During the song, the same melody that played underground occurs, though this time, Nellie’s positive attitude has changed it from minor to major. Her optimism is uplifting, and the two women share a playful moment in which their worries about Floyd disappear.

The scene shifts underground, where Homer has journeyed close enough to Floyd for the two of them to have a conversation. The brothers are elated to be with one another, and Homer tells Floyd the exciting news about his recent purchase of a Model T. This contributes to the theme of material wealth. The absence of said wealth plagues the Collins family, especially later in the show when the rescue efforts become more dire and expensive.

Eventually, this conversation leads to Floyd becoming frustrated and hopeless about his situation. However, Homer is able to comfort him by reminding him of the time that the three siblings (Floyd, Homer, and Nellie), spent the night in a cave together when they were children. This memory is incredibly soothing to both Floyd and Homer, and they revel in this comfort in the beautiful duet, “Daybreak.” This song demonstrates the power of memory as a tool for Floyd to temporarily escape his situation. It also further emphasizes the importance of family in Floyd’s life. The brothers spend the night in the cave together.

The next morning, William Burke “Skeets” Miller, a sports reporter for the local Louisville Courier-Journal, is sent out to the scene. The editor of the newspaper, suspecting that the Floyd Collins situation might be a hoax, sent the rookie Miller out to investigate the scene. Little did this editor know that Miller would become one of the most crucial members of the rescue team. Miller’s nickname, Skeets, derives from his small stature. Skeets, realizing that his size may allow him to reach Floyd, impulsively decides to enter the cave to reach Floyd.

As Skeets enters the cave, H.T. Carmichael from the Kentucky Rock and Asphalt Company appears on the scene. Homer and Carmichael are immediately at odds with one another, as Carmichael suggests using a harness to yank Collins out of the cave. This upsets Homer, as it could potentially tear off Floyd's foot. However, Lee sides with Carmichael, and Homer walks away frustrated and suspicious of Carmichael's intentions. From this very first interaction, Homer sees Carmichael as an outlander, which is the root of the conflict that the two men will continue to have throughout the show.

Suddenly, Skeets Miller appears from within the cave, disturbed and out of sorts. He "sings" (rather, rhythmically speaks) the song "I Landed on Him," in which he reflects upon the disturbing experience of witnessing a man trapped deep underground in a dark, wet, cricket-infested cave. The sporadic, harsh rhythms and melodies within this song successfully capture Miller's panic. After the song, Miller encounters Nellie, who explains Floyd's friendship with the crickets who live in the cave. Yet again, we see Nellie's borderline-psychoic understanding of Floyd. Though most would view a friendship with crickets as a bit bizarre, it makes perfect sense to Nellie, who tells Miller, "He's always sayin' we're a fine pair 'cause my head's in the clouds an' his is in the dirt." Once again, the relationship between Floyd and Nellie is demonstrated: they are essentially each other's yin and yang. While their interests and states of mind are not the same, they share a common understanding of "luck" and (later "glory") that nobody else can truly grasp. During this scene, Nellie tells Miller that the "luck" is a compass that Floyd carries with him everywhere he goes. It is unclear whether Nellie means a literal compass, or some sort of otherworldly guide that the two share. It seems as though Landau purposefully left this to be ambiguous.

The next scene depicts presents Carmichael arranging the harness pull. He selects Miller to be stationed closest to Floyd. This irks Homer, though he does acknowledge that Miller's size gives him an advantage in reaching Floyd. The power struggle between Carmichael and Homer continues to boil beneath the surface, as both of them are trying to maintain control of the situation.

Meanwhile, Floyd is still underground, lonely with nothing but the crickets and his thoughts. He sings the ballad, "An' She'd Have Blue Eyes," in which he imagines the kind of woman he will be with when he is finally free from his cave. Like "Daybreak," this song is another form of escapism that Floyd uses to cope with his predicament.

This moment is abruptly interrupted by the harness pull beginning. Floyd screams in terror, which prompts the line of men to stop pulling. They try a few more times, but to no avail. The men are frustrated and disheartened by another failed rescue attempt, and the scene then shifts above ground to Miss Jane and Lee. Lee feels guilty for subjecting Floyd to the painful harness, but Miss Jane assures him that he was trying to do the right thing. She then begins to tell Lee about the importance of family in difficult situations. She tells Lee, "All of us is a bit touched if you look close enough. That makes family." This quote is not only one of the most poignant of the show, but it also ties directly into what Nellie says earlier in the show. While the Collins family is an eclectic group of people with vastly different priorities and states of mind, their quirks are what bring them together. This becomes more fully realized in Act II's "The Dream."

This conversation becomes the song, "Heart An' Hand," in which Miss Jane and Lee discuss the importance of staying united as a family in order to persevere through their current situation. Seeing as the song takes place above ground, the music is heavily inspired by bluegrass, complete with a guitar and a harmonica.

The scene returns underground as Skeets Miller is updating Floyd on everything happening above ground, including the fact that the Miller's article about Floyd has been syndicated to over 1,200 newspapers across the nation. However, Floyd responds to this by saying, "Wal, hot diggety damn, fella - you're a success!" Not only does this display his selflessness, but it also serves as a clue that perhaps widespread fame is not what Floyd meant by "glory" when he first discovered the cave. He cares less about his own fame, and more about the success of Miller's journalism. Miller then begins to interview Floyd, asking him what it's like to be trapped underground. Floyd dances around the question, as he clearly is unwilling to display any sort of vulnerability about his situation. Eventually, however, he opens up to Miller, talking about his close relationship with Nellie, as well as his confidence that "the Luck" will guide him to safety. He also briefly entertains the possibility of never escaping, which he softens by talking about how he will be reunited with his mother in Heaven. Miller vows to rescue him, and then says goodbye to Floyd for the night.

Floyd and Nellie sing a brief duet, though Nellie is above ground and Floyd is still trapped, yet again emphasizing their deep connection to one another. The next scene begins above ground, as more and more visitors are flocking to the site, including Cliff Roney, a filmmaker who sees movie star potential in Homer. Another visitor is Dr. Hazlett, a doctor from Chicago who is overwhelmed and basically useless. Lee offers hundreds of dollars he does not have to Hazlett, begging him to amputate Floyd's leg in order to free him. This comes much to the dismay of Miss Jane, who reminds Lee of the fact that they do not have enough money for such an expensive procedure. Poverty is proving to be a stubborn obstacle in the rescue effort.

In the meantime, Carmichael has ordered that the cave passageway be closed off to unauthorized personnel. This infuriates Homer, who is seen by Carmichael as unauthorized personnel. So, Homer sprints into the cave as an act of defiance over Carmichael's emerging power

trip. He quickly arrives at the spot where he and Floyd can speak with one another, but he is still unable to make it through the final passageway that Miller is able to squeeze through. So, while Homer and Floyd share some playful banter, Homer continues digging in an effort to widen the passageway.

Here, “The Riddle Song,” begins. This song is another example of Homer and Floyd using memories as a form of escapism. Interwoven throughout the riddles they are asking each other are fond childhood memories. In the original staging, Floyd rises from his seated position (for the first time in over an hour) and the two frolic around the stage as they relive their memories. Then, when Floyd asks Homer a riddle, the two swap places, and now Homer is in Floyd’s seated trapped position. Again, this emphasizes the power of memories, specifically pertaining to family. As of now, it has been the only thing that has been successful in “freeing” Floyd.

However, one of Floyd’s memories quickly turns sour. He is reminiscing about jumping into the water with Homer as a child, but the memory morphs into an eerie death metaphor:

An’ I open up for my swan dive
My spread eagle, my Jesus-on-the-Cross!
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the **glory**
Forever and ever... through the flashing sun...
Ever and ever... over and over...
Fallin’... into that black water
And that rock, stickin’ up and comin’ at my face!
That cold, black grave... cold grave... grave

One particularly notable lyric in this section is the word “glory.” Here, it is used in a death-related context, implying that Floyd’s definition of “glory” has shifted even more from “The Call”

and his conversation with Miller, when it was more related to fame. Now, however, “glory” is a term more closely associated with faith, foreshadowing his final religious soliloquy in “How Glory Goes.”

During this section of this song, Floyd panics and returns to his trapped position. To comfort him, Homer tells him a riddle to which the answer is obviously the strength of their brotherhood and friendship. By the end of this riddle, Homer has broken through the passageway keeping them apart, and they are able to embrace for the first time since Floyd has been trapped. The song ends with a celebration of their brotherhood in one of the most heartfelt and uplifting moments of the show, again displaying how crucial family is to Floyd’s emotional and physical survival. END OF ACT ONE (finally).

Act two marks the beginning of “The Carnival.” This section of the show opens with Homer repeatedly emerging from the cave, while filmmaker Cliff Roney directs him on how to make it look more dramatic for film. Homer quickly becomes fed up with Roney’s nonsense, which is the first notable reference to the highly important bystander theme. In both the true story of Floyd Collins and the musical, despite there being countless witnesses to Floyd’s entrapment, he was still unable to be saved. While this is somewhat due to a lack of technology in 1925 rural Kentucky, it is also due to the fact that the bystanders did not take action quickly enough, or in most cases, at all. The role of the media in the story is a prime example of this. Homer expresses his frustration with this, saying, “Look, Mr. Roney, I’d love to be in one of yer movies one day, but right now, my brother is still trapped, an’ I got to get back to the work area, sir.” Roney’s presence is nothing but a nuisance to Homer and the other people working to rescue Floyd, rendering Roney nothing but a bystander attempting to capitalize off of the tragedy. Directly after this scene, the reporters sing the song, “Is That Remarkable?,” a nod to Vaudeville which satirically

highlights the fact that the media is far more concerned with reporting a compelling story than the truth, and that they, like Roney, are simply bystanders getting in the way of the rescue operation. The only member of the media who is actively trying to help the situation is Skeets Miller.

It is also important to note that during “Is That Remarkable,” Homer learns that Carmichael is up for promotion at his company, which is a potential explanation for why he has been so intense and unwilling to compromise (from Homer’s point of view). Carmichael’s status as an outlander is continuing to bother Homer, and the conflict between them is rapidly approaching an explosion. Carmichael proceeds to announce to the media that he will begin to build a shaft to reach Collins, much to the chagrin of Homer. Once again, he does not like the idea of an outsider, who does not understand the land as well as he does, leading the rescue operation and making executive decisions. Carmichael condescendingly dismisses Homer, who, along with Bishop and Doyle, are furious at Carmichael’s audacity.

After the cacophony of “Is That Remarkable,” Miller travels back down to Floyd in order to explain the madness that is occurring above ground in a musical sequence called “The Carnival.” During this song, Skeets Miller describes the frenzy as, “An estimated thirty thousand visitors make their way to this obscure field in Kentucky, the once barren farm begins to look more like a country fair- a carnival... a dream.” Meanwhile, on stage, several “hawkers” are seen selling items such as “Sand Cave balloons,” “camp chairs,” and “Floyd Collins scrapbooks,” to name just a few. Like the media, these tourists cause commotion and traffic, making it extremely difficult for rescuers to reach the site and do their jobs. Regardless of their intentions, they too are self-serving bystanders.

Another major plot point that occurs during “The Carnival” sequence is Homer receiving a telegram inviting him to sing on a Vaudeville stage. Here, we see Homer being tempted by the

distractions of the “carnival.” Luckily, he is not enchanted by the telegram. However, he is clearly still distracted by his disgust towards Carmichael.

Lee is also tempted by the “carnival” during this sequence. He is seen selling “Floyd Collins Onyx,” which, as our voice-of-reason Miss Jane points out, is completely worthless. Though Lee is playing into the “carnival” solely to earn more money to invest into the rescue mission, he too is distracted by all of the bystanders who have gathered around the cave entrance, giving them even more power over the rescue operation.

“The Carnival” sequence finally ends, and the scene returns to Miller trying to use a crowbar to dislodge the rock that is pinning Floyd to the cave floor. Suddenly, Floyd hears Nellie’s voice. He seems to know something is wrong, as he keeps telling Miller to leave the cave immediately. Miller, however, only claims to hear the wind and he continues working to pry Floyd free. At the top of the cave, Bishop yells down to Miller that he needs to evacuate immediately. Floyd asks Miller to kiss him goodbye, as if he knows exactly what is about to occur. He proceeds to say, “Bye, Skeets. See you in heaven.” Miller, who is confused and worried, starts to leave the cave, and right behind him, the cave walls collapse, shutting Floyd off from the outside world once and for all. Throughout the entire cave in, Nellie and Floyd are singing with one another. Again, this exhibits Floyd and Nellie’s connection not only to one another, but to the land. Nellie’s music serves as a warning to Floyd, as she seems to be able to predict the cave-in.

Though the rescuers suspect that Floyd survived the cave-in, they are completely unable to reach him to bring him food and water. Nellie, still in her naive bliss, decides to journey into the cave, stating that “Mr. Skeets, cave-in don’t matter none. You’ll see. You rest now, an’ I’ll be back in a jiffy.” Luckily, Miller is able to stop her, but Nellie erupts into the introduction of “Through the Mountain,” in which she expresses her frustration at the men excluding her from the rescue

mission: “But why can all of you go? Like fire! Like air! ‘Tain’t fair that all a’you go.” In this, she refers to the men as “fire” and “air.” This is notable because she doesn’t reference the earth, and although the message is ambiguous, she seems to be commenting on the rescuers’ lack of connection to the earth. She believes this connection to be necessary to the rescue, which takes her into the main section of the song.

“Through the Mountain” is a deeply poetic lullaby that Nellie sings to Floyd, as she describes her fantasy of rescuing Floyd from the cave. She describes in vivid detail her wishes to see Floyd’s cave:

You kin take me on a tour of the em'rald towers.
To the spires of sapphires an' waterfalls a' crystal.
We'll lay down to sleep with the gypsum flowers,
As we follow 'long the diamonds to the outside.

However, in the bridge, the lyrics begin to suggest that rather than to bring Floyd from the cave to the outside world, Nellie wants to bring Floyd to Heaven:

Gonna git you outta there,
To a land a' babies dancin' with a banjo in the air.
An' the sky is all lit up with lemons and roses;
Ev'rythin' from your head to your toes is warm.

The line, “To a land a' babies dancin' with a banjo in the air” is especially evocative of death, referencing a sort of Kentucky-fied version of cherubs playing harps in Heaven. The fact that Nellie is talking about bringing Floyd to Heaven ties together a number of themes: faith, glory (perhaps “glory” is finding Heaven), and family (Nellie and Floyd’s connection, their connection with their late mother).

“Through the Mountain” fully establishes Nellie as a “Cassandra” figure. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was cursed to tell accurate prophecies that nobody else believed. In *Floyd Collins*, while everyone dismisses Nellie as being mentally unstable, she actually possesses a unique psychic ability that only Floyd can understand.

The song ends, and the action returns to Carmichael’s shaft, which is being built by Bishop, Jewell, and other locals. Doyle, the landowner, is off to the side, drunkenly expressing his grief over watching his land be destroyed. Miller and Homer try to enter the site, but Carmichael kicks both of them off, telling them of the Governor’s decision to put Carmichael in charge of the rescue mission. This point in the show serves as the peak of the bystander theme. Although everyone has the same end goal, Homer and Carmichael are completely unable to compromise, which leads to a delay in the rescue mission. Homer’s fury is expressed in the song “Git Comfortable,” in which he says the following:

Git comfortable, outlander,
Strut an’ stomp aroun’,
Act like you was born right here,
Sprouted outta this groun’.
These hills’ll take ya in, heck!
You harness-pullin’, fool-shaft diggin’,
Outlander speck of fly shit on my boot,
City-slickin’ suit.

Clearly, Homer is angry at Carmichael’s arrogance and dismissal of Homer’s knowledge about the land. Even though Carmichael is working hard to free Floyd, Homer is unable to look past Carmichael’s status as an “outlander.” In the real story of Floyd Collins, a shaft is built and is

able to reach where Floyd was trapped, but not until three days after Floyd had passed away. Perhaps if Homer and Carmichael had spent less time arguing and more time listening to each other and compromising, they could have reached Floyd in time.

“Git Comfortable” ends as Homer storms off, deeply distressed. The scene returns to the shaft, which is on the verge of collapse in the pouring rain. The laboring men are able to escape before it does collapse, though this leaves everyone feeling even more disheartened than before.

Next, we see Lee scavenging around Bee Doyle’s farm, looking for empty soda bottles to exchange for money. When Homer questions his actions, Miss Jane abruptly defends Lee, saying that he is “Jes’ tryin’ to see after us.” Miss Jane senses the strong tension between Lee and Homer, and is trying to do everything she can to maintain the peace. Homer then breaks the news to his family that he plans to leave town permanently once Floyd is rescued. This leads Lee to mutter, “Good for nothin’ ingrate,” which sparks an intense battle between Lee, Homer, and Miss Jane, while Nellie collapses to ground and tries to sing to Floyd. This scene becomes an uproar of accusations and outbursts. Lee continually references God, suggesting that if it is in God’s will for Floyd to perish in the cave, he is at peace with it. This infuriates Homer, which then causes him to accuse his father of trying to financially capitalize off of Floyd’s situation. (Ironically, it is interesting to note that in real life, both Homer *and* Lee went on the Vaudeville circuit to tell Floyd’s story.... in exchange for money.)

Lee proceeds to lash out at the whole family, accusing Nellie of being possessed by the devil, Homer and Floyd of being foolish in their love of caves, Homer being materialistic and Miss Jane being a “naggin’ woman.” This finger pointing brings together multiple themes, including material wealth, family, faith, and caves vs. farms.

In one last act of defiance, Homer exclaims, “T’ain’t our fault Mama died! An t’ain’t our fault that our fault neither that you died with ‘er!” Lee ends this argument once and for all by slapping Homer across the face.

This family argument is a powerful moment that displays how the stress of Floyd being trapped has torn the family apart. It is heartbreaking, as all of these characters have previously expressed how they seek comfort from family. However, referencing back to Miss Jane’s line, “All of us is a bit touched if you look close enough. That makes family,” it is clear that despite their differences, they still remain a family. Though this is her adopted family, Miss Jane is the centerpiece of the family; the glue that holds everyone together. Without her, they would crumble (come on STRONG FEMALE LEAD)!

This explosive scene leads directly into the final reprise of “The Ballad of Floyd Collins,” which unites all of the locals in a somber telling of Floyd’s tale, as well as each person’s experiences with the rescue mission. Each section of the song ends with the line, “And there he remains all alone in a cold Kentucky hillside.” This line emphasizes the fact that regardless of what is happening above the ground, Floyd is still trapped in the cave. It can be interpreted as the community finally admitting that they have nothing left to offer the rescue effort, and they feel that they now can do nothing but be bystanders.

The song ends, and Miller wants to try one last time to reach Floyd. Carmichael reluctantly agrees, and Miller begins to venture down into the cave. Miller is able to dig fairly far down, almost (but not quite) close enough to communicate with Floyd. Suddenly, however, it appears as though Miller is able to break through and rescue Floyd. This marks the beginning of “The Dream,” as Nellie’s voice begins to move closer and closer to Floyd until they are able to embrace.

“The Dream” comes into full swing, with Nellie and Floyd joyously celebrating their reunion. The music reflects their joy, combining musical motifs and elements from Floyd’s “The Call,” and Nellie’s “Lucky.” Nellie tells Floyd that she has been at his side the entire time, just as he was at her side when she had been locked away in the asylum. Nellie then proceeds to sing one of the most lyrically and melodically beautiful verses in the entire show:

Some people go place to place, some people go underground
Some gotta go crazy like, I just journey in
And that is where I've been...

Here, Nellie is talking about the Collins family. Their familial connection is reestablished, referencing all the ways in which they cope with difficult times. Homer goes “place to place,” Floyd goes “underground,” Lee goes “crazy,” and Nellie “journeys in.” Nellie continues by singing:

We all go somewhere, and that's how we get along
If folks just don't understand it, why that ain't nothin' wrong

Again, she is talking about everyone’s coping mechanisms. She is validating Floyd’s passion for exploring caves, while also validating her own “Cassandra-isms” as well as Homer’s desire to leave and Lee’s short temper. She then proceeds to talk about her special connection with Floyd:

You and me, we follow a sound that is whistlin' around in the air...
Since momma's gone, we heard it callin'

According to Nellie, the two of them are the only ones who can sense their mother’s presence. This also refers to the “wind” that they both have referenced throughout the show, finally clarifying that this “wind” is the sound of their mother’s call (and remember, Floyd’s first song

about the cave is also called, “The Call”). Nellie continues once again, this time venturing again into death-territory:

And it's kinda restful when you see that you're not alone

We're finally together here in the unknown

The most striking phrase here is “We’re finally together here in the unknown.” It is the first clear clue that this “rescue” is in fact a dream; Floyd has not been physically rescued at all. They are not together outside the cave, but instead in “the unknown”- a sort of limbo between life and death. This is reflected by an eerie, lingering chord on the word “unknown.” The last lyrics in this section are as follows:

We are always wanderin' and wantin' to know why we are what we are

We always have the whistlin' question

And there ain't an answer but only the askin'

Forever

This directly foreshadows Floyd’s final soliloquy that he is about to sing, “How Glory Goes.” The song is essentially comprised of a list of questions that Floyd has about what Heaven, or, as we now know it to be, “glory,” will be like. It is not until his death that he can receive any sort of answers to these “whistlin’ questions.”

This intimate (and lyrically DENSE) moment is interrupted by Homer joyfully making the sound of a car horn. The music returns to the same jaunt when Nellie and Floyd were reunited at the beginning of “The Dream,” and then the siblings take a ride in Homer’s new Model T. As they ride, Nellie and Homer tell Floyd of all the work they’ve done on the cave to prepare for its grand opening to the public. The siblings then burst into the echo motif, except rather than Floyd’s own voice being the echo, it is Homer and Nellie who are the echoes. While this is one of the most

uplifting moments in the show, it is also another clue that this is purely Floyd's hallucination. If it were really happening, Floyd's own voice would be the echo, as it would demonstrate the wide open space of the cave. However, because Nellie and Homer are the ones creating the echoes, it can be inferred that it is a fabrication- it is not actually coming from the cave.

Suddenly, the ensemble appears onstage as visitors of the cave, exclaiming "The Great Sand Cave! Floyd Collins! The greatest caver ever known!" (The last phrase will later become his epitaph, though in real life it was "The greatest cave explorer ever known.") The entire ensemble then joins the echo motif (while Lee and Miss Jane exclaim, "My boy!"), and Floyd is truly living out his fantasy- the fame, the fortune, the celebration- surrounded by his entire family, group of friends, and a large group of tourists.

Yet again, however, the fact that the echo motif is coming from the ensemble hints at the fact that this is not real. This section of the dream comes to a gut wrenching halt when Floyd yodels, but rather than being met with a triumphant set of echoes, he is met with complete silence. His dream begins to disintegrate as Lee says, "No, son. Yer still trapped. Jes' left to die." The ensemble's harmonies turn sour, as they ominously chant, "The greatest caver ever know. Buried with his treasure." Floyd desperately tries to grasp onto his dream, but the music begins to slip away. The same music from Floyd's "My spread eagle, my Jesus-on-the-Cross" moment in "The Riddle Song" returns, representing the disintegration of his fantasy. He is left with only Nellie, who sings to him:

Floyd, Let go

Floyd, Let go

You have to let go

You have to let go, Floyd

Ooh ooh oh ohh oh

You have to let go

Oh...

The music has transformed back into where the dream started: the ghostly set of “oohs” that Nellie sings to Floyd throughout the show. Nellie is finally guiding Floyd to Heaven, perhaps suggesting that Nellie’s “ooohs” are in fact “the wind” of their mother.

“The Dream” transitions directly into “How Glory Goes,” which starts with Floyd addressing God directly, saying:

I'm ready now Lord.

I know, I weren't no Sunday school momma's boy.

But faith is hoping for somethin', believin' what you can't see.

I had faith all my life.

I wanna ask you something

Clearly, the faith theme is present here, as Floyd, now on his way to Heaven, is faced with fear about what lies ahead. He is about to ask the very questions that Nellie refers to in “The Dream.”

The song proper begins with an alternating pattern of eighth notes, giving the effect of Floyd’s anticipation. He begins asking about Heaven: what it will look like, smell like, feel like, etc. His ideas of Heaven alternate between beautiful images (i.e. “Is it warm? Is it soft against your face? Do you feel a kind of grace inside the breeze?”), and not-so-beautiful images (i.e. Is it endless and empty and you wander on your own? Slowly forget about the folks that you have known?”). The music reflects these shifts between positive and negative as Floyd grapples with his ideas of Heaven.

Later in the song, Floyd sings:

Will I want, will I wish for all the things I should'a done?

Longin' to finish what I only just begun

Or has a shiny truth been waitin' there for all the questions ev'rywhere

In a world of wonderin', suddenly you know, and you will always know

Here, Floyd is wrestling with his idea of what “glory” really means. Has he failed in achieving the fame and fortune version of “glory,” since he never escaped the cave? Or, has the “glory” been with him all along? The answer directly follows this verse, as the song shifts into the bridge:

Will my mama be there waiting for me? (*this is a musical climax!*)

Smilin' like the way she does

And holdin' out her arms

And she calls my name

She will hold me just the same

Ta-da! The real definition of “glory” is being in Heaven with his mother!

Amidst all of this deep philosophical analysis, it is important to remember the above-ground rescue mission. Just before Floyd sings his final verse, Miller appears above ground, reporting Floyd’s death. Miller then disappears for the last time, and Floyd is left alone onstage. Now, more sure of himself than ever before, Floyd sings the final verse of the song:

Only Heaven knows how glory goes

What each of us was meant to be

In the starlight, that is what we are

I can see so far

As Floyd has now discovered, the only way to discover the definition of “glory” is to be in Heaven. That is where all of the answers lie, and now that Nellie has led him to the other side, all of his questions can be answered.

One last time, the echo motif returns, this time at its grandest. Floyd’s yodels echo deeply into Heaven as he escapes from his underground prison and ascends towards glory.

Blackout.

In 1925, the Collins family certainly did not know that their stories would be turned into a musical, especially not one that merits a 30 page psychological exploration of what it means to live and die. However, what the Collins family did know was that the impact of their story was incredibly far-reaching.

Though the nationwide impact of the tragedy is mentioned several times throughout *Floyd Collins*, due to the fact that the show’s setting never shifts from Bee Doyle’s farm in Barren County, KY, the full impact of the tragedy is a bit difficult for the audience to fully grasp.

Not only were articles about Floyd circulating around the country like a plague, but nationwide radio audiences were regularly tuning into their local stations to hear about the events in Cave City, KY. Collins’ story quickly became one of the nation’s first major media frenzies. As Murray and Brucker discuss in their book, “The Collins affair was the first sustained nonpolitical event in which the radio played a major role. The misfortune of this helpless man became an important part of every newscast, beginning on Wednesday February 4” (155). The story quickly engaged radio audiences as far away as San Francisco, and soon, the entire nation was hooked.

Floyd impact also reached pop culture, specifically the music scene of the 1920s. Directly after Floyd’s death, the song “The Death of Floyd Collins” was written by Reverend Andrew

Jenkins and Irene Spain. Originally performed and recorded by Vernon Dalhart, the song was so popular that it was recorded by several different artists. As previously mentioned, this song serves as inspiration for Guettel's "The Ballad of Floyd Collins." Another, more bizarre example of the story's musical impact is the Black Stone Cherry's 2008 hard rock song, "Ghost of Floyd Collins." The lyrics share some similarities with Dalhart and Guettel's versions, but the style of the song is very clearly different.

Floyd's story had some negative repercussions, as well. On February 17, 1925, the day that Floyd's death was officially announced, the Louisville Courier-Journal (the newspaper that Skeets Miller worked for) published an article entitled, "Boy, 13, is Killed Emulating Collins." A 13-year-old boy from Barnesboro, PA was playing "Collins in the cave" when he was crushed by a falling rock and was unfortunately unable to be saved. This terribly depressing article demonstrates the massive scale of the media frenzy, and the widespread attention that Floyd Collins' story was receiving by even children across the nation. It is also interesting to note that some things never change: in 1925, teenagers played "Collins in the cave," and today, teenagers eat tide pods.

Several books, movies, and documentaries have been produced about Floyd Collins, but I obviously believe that the most artistically profound work about Floyd Collins is Landau and Guettel's musical. Landau and Guettel have crafted a show that is able to tell a linear, historically accurate story while also incorporating the a non-linear exploration of the characters' hopes, fears, and emotions. The symbolism in *Floyd Collins*, especially at the end of the show, is tremendously philosophical, and therefore, completely ambiguous and open to interpretation. That juxtaposition: telling a clear, straightforward story while also leaving so much open to interpretation, is what makes *Floyd Collins* such a special piece of art.

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