

# Author Nicholas Sparks Dismisses Allegations of Homophobia & Racism As Broadway Readies For 'The Notebook' Musical

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**D** [deadline.com/2019/06/nicholas-sparks-broadway-the-notebook-musical-homophobic-antigay-allegations-1202632304](https://deadline.com/2019/06/nicholas-sparks-broadway-the-notebook-musical-homophobic-antigay-allegations-1202632304)

For the second time in recent months, real-world controversy has visited the make-believe world of Broadway musicals.

Nicholas Sparks, whose 1996 novel *The Notebook* is being turned into a Broadway musical by, among others, playwright and *This Is Us* producer Bekah Brunstetter, was slammed in a Daily Beast article today for seemingly anti-gay emails he sent to the former headmaster of the faith-based prep school Sparks co-founded in 2006.

The situation echoes – if at a much lower volume – the recent and far-from-over controversy trailing the Michael Jackson-based musical *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*.

Just this week, Vanessa Hudgens confirmed that she would take part in the first staged reading of the musical *Notebook* adaptation at Vassar and New York Stage & Film's prestigious annual play development incubator called the Powerhouse. Others reportedly set to take part in the one-time-only reading on June 23 are Jelani Alladin, Nicholas Belton, Candy Buckley, Antonio Cipriano, Hailey Kilgore and James Naughton. *Rent* director Michael Greif will direct. (That news was broken by EW).

The Daily Beast story details the legal battle between the hugely successful romance writer Sparks and Saul Benjamin, the former headmaster and CEO of the Epiphany School of Global Studies in New Bern, North Carolina. In emails obtained by the website, Sparks, whose many bestselling movie-fodder novels also include *A Walk To Remember*, expressed opinions that are sure to be unpopular, to put it mildly, in the Broadway theater community.

According to the article, written by Tarpley Hitt, Sparks (a trustee of the school he co-founded in 2006) "chastised" Benjamin for (in Sparks' own words) promoting "an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted."

Sparks also, according to the article, made racist comments, including that the school's dearth of black students was due to the fact that they are "too poor and can't do the academic work." Benjamin, according to the Daily Beast, also claims that when he appeared at an event with the president of the local NAACP chapter, Sparks confronted him, claiming the public association brought "disrepute to Epiphany."

Sparks posted a response to the Daily Beast on Twitter today (read it below), saying the article repeats “false allegations and claims,” and that claims of discrimination and harassment made by Benjamin have been rejected in court (a trial is set for August in U.S. District Court on remaining issues in Benjamin’s lawsuit, including whether Sparks defamed the former headmaster by suggesting to other board members that Benjamin suffered from dementia).

But legal rulings aside, the Daily Beast article damningly reprints, and quotes verbatim, Sparks’ messages to Benjamin, including one in which he castigates Benjamin as being “the *only* reason” (italics his) for the school’s inclusion of sexual orientation in its non-discrimination policy.

Wrote Sparks (all sics his): “About the non-discrimination policy you keep bringing up: please remember that sexual orientation was NOT in there originally, and that the *only* reason it was added was that YOU insisted it be specifically be added, or you said that the school might get in serious legal trouble. Frankly, no one but you wanted it in there...”

The article also details Sparks’ efforts to ban student protests at the school, “an impulse,” the site writes, “that came directly in response to two lesbian girls planning to announce their orientation during chapel.”

In an industry where that effort would typically be portrayed as villainous – *The Prom*, anyone? – Sparks planned Broadway arrival via a *Notebook* musical is all but certain to prove awkward at the very least. Imagine the opening night party attended by Sparks and the musical’s producers Kevin McCollum (*Avenue Q*, *Rent*, *In the Heights*) and Kurt Deutsch (founder of Sh-K-Boom/Ghostlight Records, a leading Broadway cast album imprint that’s won Grammy Awards for *The Book of Mormon*, *In the Heights* and *Beautiful*).

*The Notebook* musical will feature music and lyrics by “Girls Chase Boys” hit-maker Ingrid Michaelson, with a book by playwright and *This Is Us* supervising producer Brunstetter.

When the production was announced in January, Sparks, whose 1996 novel was turned into a hit 2004 movie starring Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams, said, “I am thrilled to work with Bekah and Ingrid in order to make *The Notebook* a reality on Broadway. They are amazingly talented, and obviously, the story is near and dear to my heart.”

At the time, producers McCollum and Deutsch issued a joint statement: “The creative process works best when the material finds the artist, and that’s exactly what happened with Nicholas Spark’s novel, *The Notebook*. From day one, Ingrid and Bekah have had a clear vision for the show, and even at this early stage, it has proven to be an exceptionally exciting and fruitful collaboration.”

Given that Benjamin’s legal battle with Sparks and the school board has been going on for five years, it’s at the very least possible the Broadway team was aware of the dispute. If so,

perhaps their attraction to the novel outweighed any philosophical disagreements with the novelist.

Platinum recording artist Michaelson said in January, "When I was approached about working on *The Notebook* I had to excuse myself and go to the bathroom and cry and come back into the meeting. I have loved the movie and the story for so many years now that the idea of turning it into a musical overwhelmed me."

Though the claims against Sparks pale in significance and heinousness to allegations against Jackson, Broadway's *Notebook* situation recalls, at the very least in lousy timing, the controversy over the Jackson-based musical *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*. In January, producers of that musical canceled a pre-Broadway engagement in Chicago, blaming scheduling difficulties caused by a then-recently ended Actors' Equity strike. [Equity fired back](#), saying any delays in the musical's development caused by the 33-day strike were minimal.

The cancellation of the Chicago run of *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough* came just weeks before the March 3 airing on HBO of *Leaving Neverland*, the documentary that chronicles child sexual abuse allegations against the late King of Pop. The Jackson musical will feature a book by two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Lynn Nottage and a score featuring more than 25 Jackson songs, with Tony Award winner Christopher Wheeldon directing and choreographing. The musical depicts Jackson and his collaborators as they rehearse for the 1992 *Dangerous Tour*.

*Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough* is set to make its world premiere on Broadway in summer 2020. The producers have said that a national tour will subsequently premiere in Chicago. The musical, produced by The Michael Jackson Estate and Columbia Live Stage, reportedly does not focus on Jackson's personal life.

Production dates for *The Notebook* have not been announced, nor has casting. Deadline has reached out to the musical's team for producer comment, and will update this article as necessary.

Here is Sparks' response to the Daily Beast article:

[pic.twitter.com/y4nZX6TByD](https://pic.twitter.com/y4nZX6TByD)

— Nicholas Sparks (@NicholasSparks) [June 13, 2019](#)