



"Lost in Yonkers" Finds Its Way to Morristown

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([00:03](#)):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts podcast. Pioneer Productions Company is dedicated to sharing the collective human story through live theatrical performance by producing shows that are relevant to our time and inspiring audiences to attend live theater, and it serves their mission well that their upcoming show is Neil Simon's "Lost in Yonkers." Though set in 1942, the play echoes the troubles of our modern world and speaks to audiences through the eyes of a dysfunctional, albeit entertaining, New York family. The play boasts the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for drama, along with four Drama Desk awards and another four Tonys, including Best Play. Focusing on two young boys after the death of their mother, who were abruptly left with their forbidding grandmother and their young aunt with an intellectual disability. The play shows audiences a glimpse of one family's difficult life in New York during the World War II era, bringing both humor and heart to a troublesome time. Today I spoke with Pioneer Productions Company founder and "Lost in Yonkers" director Dan Vissers and his cast, Heidi Molnar and Noah Shidlovsky.

DAN VISSERS ([01:13](#)):

My name is Dan Vissers and I'm the director.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:15](#)):

You're also the co-founder of Pioneer Production Company, aren't you?

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DAN VISSERS ([01:18](#)):

Yes, that's correct. I'm one of three co-founders, and we got established in 2003, so our 20th year this year.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:27](#)):

Oh, congratulations. That's so exciting!

DAN VISSERS ([01:28](#)):

Thank you! Thank you very much.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:30](#)):

Wow. 20 years. Well, I was going to ask you if you could tell me a little bit about Pioneer while we're here.

DAN VISSERS ([01:36](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So my two partners, Shanna Levine Phelps and Jon Mantes, we all met at a theater many, many moons ago, and the three of us became really good friends and we just decided we could do theater more creatively and outside the box than the theater we were currently working at. So it

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started in 2003, we got incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, but then life kind of happened. There were some marriages and kids started coming in. So we didn't really get started until 2010 is when we started really producing heavily. And yeah, so we've done, this'll be our 18th production now.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([02:25](#)):

For *Lost in Yonkers*. I'd love to know how a play written in 1990, set in 1942 finds its way to your stage in 2023.

DAN VISSERS ([02:35](#)):

Absolutely. Well, it's funny, so Neil Simon, we have been trying to do- we love Neil Simon dearly, and so over our last 20 years, we have applied to do *Rumors*, we tried to do the *Odd Couple*, we tried to do, and for whatever reason, I don't know if the other theaters were in the vicinity, but we kept getting denied, denied, denied, denied, denied. And so finally, I said, just on a whim, my favorite play of all is "*Lost in Yonkers*," but I didn't think, if they didn't give us the rights to *Odd Couple*, they're not giving us the rights to "*Lost in Yonkers*," but I applied and just miraculously, they were like, "yeah, you guys can do it." So then we just kicked into high gear. This has been a dream for so long, but it's really relevant today about just family dynamics, how these characters are so flawed and yet so understandable. It reminds me of my family a lot lot, lot of ways. But yeah, it's just a really beautiful play. It balances humor and very serious overtones, just in a masterful way that I'm excited to bring to the stage.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([03:43](#)):

What kismet that your favorite play is the one that you finally got the rights to?

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DAN VISSERS ([03:47](#)):

Well, exactly, that's how we all looked at it. I was like, okay. I didn't even try. I was like, oh my God, if they'll give us the rights to that. So yeah, it is kismet and here we are.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([03:57](#)):

Can I ask why it's your favorite play then?

DAN VISSERS ([04:00](#)):

I think it's just the balance between- I love- there's a lot of great comedic plays, and then there's a lot of great dramatic plays. To me, this is the best marriage of the two that I've ever seen done, where it can be really lighthearted and incredibly powerful in the same moment, and I don't feel like you get that very often.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([04:23](#)):

I love that balance. My personal brand is Humor with Heart. I absolutely love that. I haven't seen the stage show before. I'm a huge Neil Simon fan, but I've only seen the movie.

DAN VISSERS ([04:34](#)):

Oh, yeah, yeah, the movie. They took some liberties in the movie. It's a little different than the play.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([04:39](#)):

Well, I'm looking forward to seeing the play for that reason, but I know that the play itself has won a number of Drama Desk awards, A number of Tonys.

DAN VISSERS ([04:48](#)):

Yeah, the Pulitzer. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([04:50](#)):

Yeah, and the Pulitzer.

DAN VISSERS ([04:51](#)):

Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([04:52](#)):

That's amazing. Absolutely amazing. I wanted to ask you, as the director, you have a number of years experience as a performer yourself.

DAN VISSERS ([05:03](#)):

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Yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([05:03](#)):

What's it like to be on the other side of the table, but also on the other side of the table for a play that's so important to you?

DAN VISSERS ([05:10](#)):

Yeah. Oh, great question. Yeah, I think that's what I think that I can bring to this is, yeah, I've been a professional actor for 25 years. I've been in the union, so I've done a lot of touring. And to be able to come to this piece as an actor, I think, I mean, all great directors, not all of them are actors themselves. And so I feel like to be able to get on the level of the actor and really know how to develop it from the ground up is something that's been very beneficial here. And we're also working, we have two young people in our cast who are in their early teens, and that's the first for me too. I've never really worked with kids before, so that's been an incredible experience, because we got really lucky with the boys we got.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([06:00](#)):

I am wondering what the audition process was like. I know how important casting is. You've never worked with children, with teens before. When you were searching for these actors, was it a scary process? Did they come to you easily? What was that process like for you?

DAN VISSERS ([06:16](#)):

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Yeah, no, it was a little nerve wracking because we got a lot of people coming out for the role of Bella and for the role of Grandma Kurnitz. Those are two monster roles that people salivate over. But for the kids, like I said, we didn't have a lot of background working with kids, so we didn't have a pool of actors to pull from. So our Jay, his name is Josiah Irwin, came into auditions and just wowed us right away. We knew that we wanted to work with him. He was going to be brilliant, but we didn't really have another kid come in that was at the level that we were able to work with. And so then we had to kind of put our tentacles out a little bit, and one of our partners put an ad out and a mom reached out to us and said, my son might be interested. And so then we got Noah who was just from Heaven above.

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([07:14](#)):

I'm Noah and I'm playing Artie.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:15](#)):

Can you tell me a little bit about what Artie is like?

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([07:18](#)):

Artie, he's a 13-year-old kid, and him and his brother have moved in with their grandma, and their grandma is very strict and gets on them about very little stuff, and he tries to deal with that, with the hardship of that, with humor.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:33](#)):

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Do you enjoy playing this character?

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([07:35](#)):

Yes. He actually reminds me of me, except for the part about moving in with your grandma.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:38](#)):

Okay. Well, that's a good sign. Hopefully that's a little bit easier for you to play if you can relate. What about him reminds you of you?

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([07:48](#)):

I mean, he's into sports. When he's nervous, he tries to deal with stuff with humor. He's 13, I'm 13.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:54](#)):

What about Artie's relationship with his grandmother? Is that difficult for you to play?

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([08:01](#)):

It's hard for me to relate to that, but once I can get in that character mindset, it gets easier from there.

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HEIDI MOLNAR ([08:12](#)):

Hello, I'm Heidi Molnar and I play Grandma Kurnitz.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([08:18](#)):

Can you tell me a little bit about that character and what she means to you?

HEIDI MOLNAR ([08:21](#)):

She means the world. She is a German grandmother who came from Germany probably in the late twenties, early thirties, and my own mother was German and my grandparents, my maternal grandparents were German. And her whole way of looking at the world is very familiar to me.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([08:44](#)):

Were you a Neil Simon fan prior to this show?

HEIDI MOLNAR ([08:48](#)):

Well, I would say he's in the air, he's everywhere. I love theater and I love comedy. I have a little background in comedy, so it was natural association for me to be associated with Neil Simon.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([09:05](#)):

I think Neil Simon is known for the strength of his dialogue as well. Do you feel a sort of comfort in speaking his words, perhaps not comfort because she isn't necessarily the kindest of characters, but do you feel, I suppose, just an ease in what he's written, what he's provided on the page?

HEIDI MOLNAR ([09:23](#)):

Well, I think his writing is absolutely masterful. It is very unlike my spoken words, but I'm acclimating myself to the way Grandma speaks.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([09:41](#)):

Can I ask you what you are hoping that audiences will take away from this production?

HEIDI MOLNAR ([09:47](#)):

I think this production is so relevant because the world is in so much turmoil, and we are in so much turmoil, and it channels that perfectly what people face, and a lot of her experience is based on the immigrant experience. And we have millions of immigrants in this country now. And I wonder, I mean, I won't be here, but I wonder in 50 years how their experiences are going to be told, because certainly we hear and see horrific stories every day of our lives that just makes it relevant. I mean, Shakespeare is relevant. The human experience is relevant.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([10:30](#)):

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That is a very good point, and that's why art is so important. We need to keep sharing these stories for years to come and that ties back to what I said earlier. This is a show from 1990 set in 1942, and here we are. Everything is still unfortunately wildly relevant. I wanted to ask you the same question. What do you hope that audiences will take away from this production?

NOAH SHIDLOVSKY ([10:52](#)):

I think I want people to realize that not everyone lives in the same environment. Not everyone's family works the same. And how if this family, they don't get along together, great. Everyone's super different in how they act and how they are. And some people's families run super smoothly, but this family doesn't. And I hope people realize that not all families are the same.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:14](#)):

That was such an incredibly wise answer, and I really appreciate that.

DAN VISSERS ([11:19](#)):

Wow. I agree with that. I'm like, holy mackerel. That's a great answer.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:22](#)):

I know I'm tearing up a little bit. That was good. Not all of us have the same relationship with our family members, and I think that is a beautiful takeaway.

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DAN VISSERS ([11:31](#)):

The most important thing about theater to me is that it's a gift to the audience to take them away from their own reality for a little while. We all have our stuff. And so good theater, whether you even mean to or not, you might be there to support a friend you might be, but good theater will grab you and not let you go.

DAN VISSERS ([11:53](#)):

And just to be able to let your personal stuff down for a little bit to put your burden down, and even if it's watching someone else's burden, it still leaves- you feel lighter. You feel like you've shared in something. And like we've said, this play is so relevant. So people are going to know these characters. They'll see themselves in these characters. And it is a beautiful story about how a dysfunctional family can still love each other and be there for each other, even in untraditional circumstances, so.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([12:29](#)):

What a really beautiful answer.

DAN VISSERS ([12:31](#)):

Oh, thank you.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([12:33](#)):

Do you think we should advise audiences to bring tissues with them?

DAN VISSERS ([12:37](#)):

I would say if you're human, bring some tissues. Yeah. This in some way, shape or form, you are going to get moved in this play. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([12:47](#)):

And if you're old school, bring a handkerchief.

DAN VISSERS ([12:50](#)):

Exactly. Our goal is just to bring people, our community, the best art we can, because people need to be exposed to the arts and people who don't even realize how powerful live theater can be. So I think that was our aim, is to pick things that we can be proud of that we can try to bring to people who may never see this play otherwise. And I love good theater because it'll affect people for years and years to come. And I hope that our show does that for someone as well, that they leave the theater changed and thinking about it.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([13:28](#)):

Lost in Yonkers will run October 27th through the 29th, and November 3rd through the 5th at the Morristown United Methodist Church in Morristown. For more information, be sure to visit PioneerProductionsCompany.org. If you like this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at JerseyArts.com. The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. This show was co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producer is Jim Atkinson. And my thanks to today's guests for their time. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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