



## "Shipwrecked!" an Epic Outdoor Journey

### Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (00:00):

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the "Jersey Arts Podcast." On The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's outdoor stage arrives an epic play with an equally epic title: "Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself)."

Louis de Rougemont was the pen name for real-life raconteur Henri Louis Grin, who sold serialized stories of his imagined adventures to the British World Wide Magazine in the late 1800s. After he was exposed as a fraud, The World Wide Magazine would publish the quote:

"Truth is stranger than fiction But De Rougemont is stranger than both."

In 2009, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Donald Margulies took these tales and reimagined the 19th Century language and cultural awareness for a modern audience. His version of Louis de Rougemont is, therefore, a fictionalization of a fictionalization—an excited adventurer who recounts his fantastical journeys of sword fights, flying wombats, and a giant octopus for audiences eager to go along for the ride.

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I spoke with actor Bruce Comer, who plays the title character, as well as the play’s director and co-scenic designer, Doug West—his voice is one you’ll hear answering my first question. Take a listen.

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (01:21):

Doug Bruce, thank you so much for taking time out of your rehearsal schedule to join me.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

You are welcome.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

Thanks for having us.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Let's start off with the show itself. It is such a long, tongue-in-cheek title: Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself). What is this show about?

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DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (01:44):

It's the story of a man who is telling us the greatest adventure of his life. He was—I want to give a ton away. He was lost at sea for a time. He had amazing adventures. He comes back to society and shares his adventures with us.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR

So it's Victorian London and he has used the space of a theater to speak to the audience and tell them his amazing adventure.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (02:11):

This is based on real events of a person who actually existed in Victorian England and showed up one day in London with an amazing story. And that particular person is who inspired this play, but that is not who our Louis is. So we don't want anyone to kind of confuse the two or think this is sort of a biopic or anything like that.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR (02:35):

This version of, of Louis, the original was invented by Donald Margulies. He was writing specifically for his son, Miles, and wanted to create an adventure that both families, the little ones as well as parents, could come into a theater and just be taken away by a storyteller. In this case, Louis is joined by three assistants who help him tell the story and play all the other parts where all the other hats,

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (03:09):

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Literally all the other hats... So what the playwright, Margulies, has done is taken this source material from Victorian England and has sort of fictionalized the fiction. Everything about it not only was originally made up, but has now been made up and rearranged by a modern playwright, so none of the people reflected in it are real. None of the—I mean, they talk about real places, but it's, it's the idea of sort of a story inside of a story.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (03:38):

And I will assume that a lot of what is done in the show is quite—without giving too much away—fantastical. So there's a bit of yarn spinning as well involved in this, right?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Definitely. Definitely. You have giant octopuses, a man becoming chief of a tribe with very little, let's say, experience in terms of warfare and stuff.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

Yeah, a whirlpool, a tidal wave...

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

A fateful dog who follows him through thick and thin...

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (04:06):

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The concept draws from several different entertainment traditions: swashbuckling, radio plays... What does the show feel like, in essence, for audience members?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

If you've ever seen *39 Steps*, *The Hound of The Baskervilles*, there's a lot, and a lot of things that are out there now that—they are sort of farcical, and you get sort of an adult twist. But part of the fun is just seeing these people race around, and one minute they're on a desert island, one minute they're on a floating wreckage, it's within pages, half a page, you just switch locales. So it's sort of like an adult cartoon, *Fractured Fairy Tales* type of feel to it. But I think—why I've got a lot of family coming to see this with little ones—I think what draws the kids in is, yes, it's an amazing story. It's something that in this case, Louis' mom read him books constantly when he was a sick little shut in and his imagination just took those, and he gets to live that type of adventure.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

And the players have the same kind of level of imagination that a lot of the props, the costumes, the theatrical elements are created in the moment. So, you know, they're the same way a kid in the backyard would pick up a stick and it would go from being a snake, to a sword, to a magic wand, back to a stick, our actors do the same things with props and scenic pieces so they can serve multiple functions.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

And Doug, you also created the scenic design for the show, right?

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

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I was one of three. It was sort of scenic design by committee. Steve Beckel, Bonnie Monte and I worked together to create this particular set. One of the things that institutionally I know the theater was interested in for the outdoor stage especially is weather has been more of a concern, and expense, to be honest, has been more of a concern with scaling down the scenic elements.

And so this idea that the audience kind of almost arrives to an empty space, it's a beautiful amphitheater when there isn't a set built on it. And so we're trying to use a little bit more of the kind of natural space. And so the scenic elements are very minimal. And so the three of us felt like it was something we could handle on our own design-wise.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (06:18):

And so how do you create the world of the show across multiple locations?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

By just saying where we are. It's sort of Shakespearean in that you say, 'I'm on an island', 'I'm aboard a ship', and sometimes you're using props, sometimes you're miming props. But that's the joy of the imagination. It comes out in the words. And everybody on stage believes that we're going to bring the audience along with us.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (06:51)

Bruce, this sounds so fun as an actor to take on.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

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It is. I will say, I'm getting up there in years. I was thrilled when I was asked to do this. When I read the script and realized it hits on a lot of levels, I'll say. It is very funny, but it's got some moments that, again, I just think are very challenging as an actor.

For me, though, it's returning to the outdoor stage at 66 and having been out there realizing it can get hot. This is a show—a role too—it takes a lot of energy and stuff. So I'm just so happy, thrilled to be able to get back to it.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Yeah, the outdoor stage is such a fun thing. I myself have done a couple of shows outdoors and the thing that I remember most is just if it's 90 degrees, it is like 100 degrees for you on stage in your costume and under the lights...

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

The great thing is though, this year, they're taking the costumes lighter. Since it is, in a sense, a play within a play, I have water bottles at my disposal whenever I feel faint... So we actually go out and interact with the audience at times. That's always what makes that—it has more of a populist feel to it. You know, it's like this is what theater should be in many ways.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

It's such a unique experience. Are there any challenges specific to the outdoor stage that you have dealt with so far in rehearsal?

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (08:21):

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I mean, one of the things that we're doing we haven't done previously. Part of it is the way the set is being constructed is we're actually making our actors for the first time because we only have four of them. And very often those shows have, I think Much Ado from last year had a cast of 16 or 18. We have the ability to to body make our actors, which will give us some control and some sort of fun things that we can do vocally with them, which is kind of—

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

The planes won't always drown us out.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (08:47):

Yes, low-flying planes, we'll be able to talk over for once. And the Kirby's an amazing place to come and see a show—our indoor theater. There's something about the outdoor stage that is so large, and so wide, and so grand, that remembering that it's a house that in theory is twice the size of the one that we may be used to playing with inside, and kind of adjusting to that larger space, and remembering that it's it's your audience isn't just flat out in front of you that they're up higher above you and making sure that we're kind of taking them all in when we can and using kind of the whole space. And then the ability to use the space itself to be able to send our actors up and into the house and running around the audience.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

It's going to be a beautiful show.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

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That's my favorite thing about outdoor theater, I think, is that you sort of you're there at dusk and then the lights, you know, the darkness comes down on everybody and you're sort of immersed in the space and that particular space. For anyone who hasn't been is just so beautiful.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Yes. Yes. In the past, too, we've—I know we've played July 4th practically every other show I've done this one, we opened on the fifth, or we start, you know, previews on the fifth. But to have the fireworks off in the distance? I was in a Loves Labors Lost when the royalty speaks at one point about 'Let there be festive lights and blah blah blah blah blah!' Almost perfectly!

It segued with 'Now we have to take a break. We, like the audience, have to just watch the fireworks and then we're going to start to play again when we get done.'

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

I love that.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Yeah, that doesn't happen in an indoor theater.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

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And I was in that audience that night, and I remember the fireworks. I remember there was this really lovely moment where all you can do is kind of lean into it. So a bunch of the cast members were standing out on the deck and we're all kind of having we're in the same space, we're breathing the same air, and we're sort of having the same moment of watching the fireworks together. And then they go away and the show starts. So that may be something—we don't know the fireworks schedule around us in early July, but it may be something we we encounter and experience as well.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (10:45):

Yeah, I love that. I think that, you know, if theater is a communal experience where you don't quite know what's going to happen, outdoor theater, you really don't know what's going to happen. And you all have to kind of embrace that moment together, which I think is often just so fun.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Yes.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (11:08):

You talked a little bit about using body mics on everybody. You also have a live Foley sound score, right?

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DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

We do. Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

For people who don't know what Foley is, give me just a quick background on that.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

It's a technique that's actually still used today. Film and television still use it constantly. And it's starting to make a resurgence in certain theatrical productions where sound effects are generated live on stage, either through doing something that is similar to the thing, i.e. a door closes and the Foley artist has like a little mini door that they close in time with the action on the stage or that something represents something else.

A few years ago, when we did *It's a Wonderful Life*, the live radio play, there was a lot of Foley work and that was, you know, well, someone's walking through the snow. So we had a Foley artist with shoes on his hands, crunching them in cornflakes on a little bucket as he was moving, you know, across the space.

This, because of the period of the play, this Foley, I think, is a little bit more imaginative and a little bit more kind of created sound, a lot of percussion. How do we symbolize a shipwreck using Foley sounds? Obviously, there's no shipwreck Foley, but figuring out how to make that, you know, the way you play with this drum or the way you—there's a moment where Louis explores the underwater, and we've decided that's probably a symbol splash that signifies he's splashing underwater. So it's a little bit less literal and a little bit more symbolic. But the idea is that we create a soundscape for the world that enhances the action of the play.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

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Bruce, for you being on stage, does that add a different element to your performance?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR (12:42):

Definitely, because again, we've got one of the cast members is the Foley expert. Two other of the assistants will be coming back there and doing wind machines, thunder crashes, things like that. But to know that in this case, Paul is back there and has got all of this equipment to play with, he brought in a didgeridoo today. So he's going [didgeridoo impression]. He's got this wonderful prayer bowl that's got this ringing sound to it could be you know, it could be the sound of the whale underneath the water. But he's oftentimes it's timing. And you've got this wonderful, clever wit of, of when does that sound effect come thing? That's when we needed it. So it's the interplay, I think, of a live Foley person, too, with the actor makes it so much fun

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

When you're creating the character of Louis de Rougemont. He is based upon a real person telling a somewhat fantastical tale. How are you crafting that character?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Well, it's great. Doug and I talk a lot about this on the phone before I even showed up. He, as Donald Margulies, the playwright, builds this character, he's very child-like, he was inspired in a sense by his mother and everything that she read. And he's been cloistered. He's been sick as a child. So he's got this wonderful purity to him. And that's what I'm desperately trying to keep. He doesn't get angry at people. He's not really judgmental of people. And he just explores life with open eyes. And recurring words are 'amazing', 'fabulous', 'wonderful.' Or so it's got that great child feel to it. What I love is, yeah, I'm not 70 the way the actual Louis was when he was doing this show, but at 66, when I become the young Louis, it's this wonderful shift into again, what was I like when I was a stupid kid, but who saw the world and saw all the people as, 'Oh, this is a wonderful opportunity for me to experience something!' I'm having a really wonderful time.

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MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Doug anything you want to add to that in terms of the character creation?

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR (15:09):

I mean that it's, it's so easy nowadays, especially if you look at kind of the source material for a play like this to assume the worst of someone. And our Louis is not that. Our Louis is, is kind of the, the best part of that imagination, the best part of that storytelling. He never talks about, why he tells the story. He just tells the story because he loves the story. There's no ulterior motive other than to tell the story. This sort of escape, I mean, I suppose a bit of an escape from reality, too. But it's it's never meant in a negative way, in a harmful way, in a malicious way. It's always just this really open, honest: 'This is what happened to me'.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

In our version too, Louis—and is based a little bit on the history—Louis tells this story to World Wide Magazine, and it's sort of like the Internet as magazines in Victorian England suddenly got established in these serialized things, Dickens wrote his novels and serials. They come out and they grow readership, and this one just sold like hotcakes all over the world—a worldwide sensation. But Louis' not thinking of he wants money—or necessarily this Louis—wants to be celebrated. It happens. He meets Queen Victoria. He presents his story to the Royal Geographic Society. It's more of the joy of telling a story. Louis' got, in a sense, that that thing of he, he knows what people get interested in and the stories that they follow, and he's just happy to feed it.

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (16:58):

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In terms of the actual history, do you know why Louis is telling this story?

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

So he, the real Louis—Henri Louis Grin was his name—was born in London to sort of an impoverished family. It's possible that his mother had some mental illness issues. His father was, I believe they said, died in debtor's prison. At some point, they think he may have worked in the household of someone as a butler and then may or may not have been working on a ship that was shipwrecked. There were reports of someone around that time who claimed to have been shipwrecked for two and a half or three years, I think is what it may have really been. Ends up in Australia, marries, has children, tries a bunch of different things, and nothing kind of works. Really, when you look at the that resumé of the real person, the job history is like spiritualist, spirit photographer, like it just kind of says shyster sort of all over it.

He then comes back to London and unleashes this sort of amazing story in Wide World Magazine, claiming he had been shipwrecked for 30 years. And you really do get the sense that it was for the purposes of, of advancing himself and, and making a name and a profit and a living for himself.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

In this case, Louis, it just seems to happen. His mother, he comes back, he tells this mother this story, everything that happened to her, and she says, 'You have to sell this to a magazine. It's too good to be true.' So he does.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

When the real Louis gets sort of found out, he then immediately sort of turns this show into a show about 'the greatest liar on Earth.' So he actually ends up—the real Louis—ends up kind of leaning into the things that he's done, as opposed to our Louis who...

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BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

...didn't do those nasty things.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

Didn't do those things. Our Louis is not Henri Grin

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (18:59):

I think it's also probably a way of for him to be seen and to have this sort of spotlight. So much of the story is about the line between fact and fiction and entertainment, right?

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

Yes. Yes. And that's where we get into wonderful discussions around the table. Stories. Stories are Stephen King had this great quote in one of his books saying that, "when people write about the past, everyone's writing fiction."

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Hmm.

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BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR:

So storytellers, often it's like that great uncle of yours who tells these great stories and then you turn to the aunt and she's going, 'You know, that ever happened, but it's very funny the way he tells it.' That's the thing is part of what storytellers do is you add a little bit, and especially if you're in front of an audience, it's like, 'Oh, you like that? Well, what if the octopus was a giant octopus?'

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Well, that sounds like a lot of fun. Thanks so much for talking to me about the show and I really look forward to seeing it.

BRUCE CROMER, ACTOR (19:52):

Thank you. Thanks for letting us speak.

DOUG WEST, DIRECTOR:

Thanks.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST:

Shipwrecked! An Entertainment - The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself) runs from July 5th through the 30th on The Outdoor Stage at St. Elizabeth University. And thanks to the Free Tickets for Kids program (sponsored by The Merrill G. & Erita E. Hastings Foundation and the

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This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to Doug West and Bruce Cromer.

I'm Maddie Orton for the "Jersey Arts Podcast." Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

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