



Eagle Theatre is Having a "Wild Party"

Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton:

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton, Host:

I'm Maddie Orton, and you're listening to the *Jersey Arts Podcast*. Andrew Lippa's musical *The Wild Party* is a night of music, dancing, drugs, deception... and that's only act one!

This is one of my all-time favorite shows, so it was a pleasure discussing The Eagle Theatre's upcoming production with Producing Artistic Director and show Director Angela Longo:

The history of this musical is really interesting—it's based on a previously-censored narrative poem from 1928 by the same name. If you don't know, *The Wild Party* actually has not one, but TWO musical adaptations that both opened in New York City in the year 2000—just months apart from each other. And while this version never made it to Broadway, it has developed quite the cult following.

A quick content warning: this episode mentions substance abuse and domestic violence, as they relate to the plot.

Without further ado, let's dive right into *The Wild Party*.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:

Angela, thank you so much for joining me today. You know, I could talk about *The Wild Party* all day long, so I'm very excited that we get to do this.

Angela Longo:

Yeah, me too. Thank you so much for having me.

Maddie Orton:

Of course. So you are the Producing Artistic Director of Eagle Theatre?

Angela Longo:

Yup.

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Maddie Orton:

So what does that entail exactly? Tell me a little bit about what you do and what Eagle Theatre does.

Angela Longo:

So Eagle Theatre is a small professional theater, and we're in Hammonton, New Jersey, and it's been producing theater for about ten years.

I've been in this position for the last two years, and while in this position we produce Mainstage productions that are ranging from musicals to small plays, and we produce all types of one-off events, drag shows, comedy events, small cabarets and the New Jersey Fringe Festival in the summertime.

We're very involved in the community and making sure that there's arts going on in all of the town events as well. And then we also have an educational conservatory program which functions year round as well too, and has a summer camp program for students of all ages to be able to perform in theater extracurriculars...And it's a labor of love, I will say.

Maddie Orton:

That's fantastic. So I went to Eagle Theatre several years back now when it was pretty new. And I just love that space.

Angela Longo:

Mmhmm

Maddie Orton:

It's so intimate. What was it originally?

Angela Longo:

It was originally a silent film theater.

Maddie Orton:

Oh, that's fantastic.

Angela Longo:

Back in like the 1920s, and it was used and altered in very different functions throughout the century of its existence, and now is going strong as a theater. But it's like about 150 to 200-seat house and the space is flexible. So we can be really innovative and creative with our seating and what kinds of productions we want to do in there because it is intimate, but it also allows us to have, like, I don't know, more engaging productions with our audiences too, because we have that kind of close interaction with them too. And it kind of creates this kind of communal vibe with our audiences, too,



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which I think many of our patrons really enjoy because they feel like they're really experiencing the shows rather than just observing and watching them like they feel like they're a part of them too.

Maddie Orton:

Oh yeah. And I think there's no bad seat in that house.

Angela Longo:

Yeah, exactly.

Maddie Orton:

Really nice. The other thing I love about Eagle Theatre is that you guys often do shows—and I think this was part of the original mission, maybe not so much the mission of the theater, but just a byproduct—I feel like there are shows that you do at Eagle Theatre that I—it's very hard to find anywhere else.

Angela Longo:

Yeah. Yeah, we are typically drawn—sometimes it's just by our space and our capacity—but to shows that don't get done very often. And yes, part of it is because of budget limitations and space limitations, but it's very artistically fulfilling too, to be able to work on shows that, like, you haven't seen somebody's version of before, so you can really put your own stamp on it too, which has been exciting for *Wild Party* because it does not get produced a lot.

And also we're not really trying to, like, make everyone happy, like we're just trying to tell stories that we're interested in, and hopefully, that's mutually reciprocated by our audiences. Like, when they can feel that there was passion and heart put into the productions, then they get to feel that rather than like—you know, it, it can be exciting to do a show that's like, you know, well-known and done on Broadway, or done in like every regional theater. But it is really exciting when you get a chance to see a show that doesn't get produced very often. And then it's a unique experience, 'cause that's what life is about. Like you, you want to—you want to see something new, You want to try something different.

It's a risky thing, I always say, like an audience choosing to come see a show, it's like they are really committing to an evening. Like that's 4 hours of your night. You drove to the theater, you had dinner, you got to the show, and then you sat there, and then you've committed. You might not know anything about the show, but once you're there, you're like, “Oh, I've got to buckle in for this!”

So I understand, like taking a risk on seeing a lesser-known show, it's risky. It's like, hopefully you enjoy it. But I do think that Eagle's pretty successful in making sure that no matter what you see there, you're going to enjoy it, whether you've known the title or not.

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Maddie Orton:

Oh, for sure. And I think that there are probably like super theater nerd tourists who are like, “I will travel an hour and a half to see a production of something I haven't been able to see before.”

Angela Longo:

Mm hmm.

Maddie Orton:

And I'm sure there are other people like me who are like, “Oh my God, this is my opportunity to see the Andrew Lippa version of *Wild Party*.” You know, “Get in the car. We're going.”

Angela Longo:

Yes, yes, yes.

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

Maddie Orton:

So let's talk about *Wild Party*. Let me just first off say I love this show. This was my first college production, so it's near and dear to my heart. I met one of my best friends in the whole world doing this show. And I listen to this original cast recording, like, just an inappropriate amount. I love it. I just think it's so good.

Angela Longo:

It is. It's really impressive, like the music and it's just like you're always like, I'm always wondering, like, “How do these people sustain and sing this show every single night?” But it is a really unique show. It's taking really interesting source material, which made it into a very unique format for a musical, I think. It lives in this world of—it's like it's kind of a concept musical, but it's also a book musical, and it kind of goes in and out of that.

Yeah, it's really unique, and it's really cool. And the characters have a lot of meat and a lot of depth to them. But also it just serves alone as like, just like a score that you can just listen to and want to jam along in the car to. Especially that original cast recording, just like listening to Taye Diggs. I'm like, I could do that all day.

Maddie Orton:

For people who aren't familiar with the concept behind all this, you know, *The Wild Party* was a and I have it right here, I'm holding it out. People can see it on the podcast, but I'm holding it up to show you that I, that I do own this. It was a long narrative poem by Joseph Moncure March.

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You know, the story behind this is...well, why don't you tell me? Do you want to give us a quick synopsis without giving away anything important?

Angela Longo:

Yeah! Let me try to do this. So it is centered around a couple, Queenie and Burrs. So Queenie is a Vaudeville dancer and Burrs is a Vaudeville clown. And they have this very lusty relationship and they're very attracted to each other, and their relationship is quite toxic, and Burrs is quite aggressive towards Queenie. And so the show starts off with this kind of explosion of their relationship where they've had one too many drinks, things have gone awry, and he lashes at her.

And her impulse is to get back at him because in this toxic relationship, she is trying to find a way out of it. And so she says, I'm going to throw a party, and I'm going to get back at him. And we'll see if that that rekindles the flame in our relationship and gets us back to that—how we started that first, like, exciting attraction that they both had originally. And see if it brings us back to that.

I don't agree with this behavior, but that is how this show starts. And the night ensues. They invite other people and someone comes along named Mr. Black, who shows Queenie a different side of what romance and love could look like. And so her original plan has shifted once she meets him and then, of course, Burrs is not happy. So we see how that progresses throughout the production.

Obviously, at a 1920s Prohibition party, they are—there's this underground, seedy group and they are living large at this party. And it's called *Wild Party* for a reason. And it has a very dramatic ending, I will say, that I cannot spoil.

Maddie Orton:

Yes, it's. Oh, my gosh.

Angela Longo:

It is so.

Maddie Orton:

So fun. I will say a couple of things. You know, if you're planning to go to this, maybe not a kid show.

Angela Longo:

It is not. We were like and maybe like an 18 and up show or, you know, just make sure—make sure you've read the content warnings on our website before checking it out, I would say.

Maddie Orton:

For sure. And there's, you know—to be super transparent, it's domestic violence. It's drug and substance abuse. Sexual content, probably harsh language?

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Angela Longo:

Yeah, there's some harsh language as well, too.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah, pretty much any content warning you have is on this show.

Angela Longo:

Exactly.

Maddie Orton:

But I think that it really leans on all of this to sort of capture this experience in a way that's really interesting. The original off-Broadway cast, Julia Murney, is Queenie, Brian D'Arcy, James as Burr, Taye Diggs as Mr. Black and Idina Menzel as Kate. Like, Oh my God, Ridiculous cast. And the other sort of beauty of this show, I think, is that it's such a like a true ensemble show, and much of it is about just meeting these crazy characters that these people are friends with, which I think must be so fun for your cast.

Angela Longo:

It's it's so fun. And I come from like a strong devising background. And so I got to when casting this show, I got to cast people who I was like, Oh, these people will create a character and they will tell a story. Like they these are like really smart actors that we got to cast in every single role.

So we have a cast of ten. We did dwindle it down a little bit with our casting, and every single character is like—has a strong story, and contributes a lot to the show, and really just tells us a lot about this world and, and the experience of these characters. Like every single ensemble member contributes to the show. Like there is no weak link in this group, and it's just very strong, and it's very dynamic. And I keep on bringing up this example of like to an actor, I'll be like, “Yeah, you're going to bring her this prop.” And so like that could just be like a very ordinary direction that I could give an actor, but like an actual, like, be like, “Great. You want me to bring her a prop? I'm going to do a forward somersault and I'm going to, like, hand it to her on my left foot and I'll do a backbend into a split.” And it's just like, it's insane. Like they're just the most creative people and like the most easy people to direct. And but it just makes for like, this whole, like, explosive community party experience. It's a blast.

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

Maddie Orton:

And one of the really interesting things about *The Wild Party* is that there are actually two different musicals, both named *The Wild Party* that came out like the same year or close to the same year, which

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is just sort of like from a musical theater history perspective, really interesting. And this particular version, the Andrew Lippa version never actually made it to Broadway, right?

Angela Longo:

Mhm. Yeah. And I think we talked about this too, that it has this like kind of like cult following, like people are very obsessed with the Lippa version. But yeah, when it became public domain, the book-length poem, just so happened that LaChiusa and Lippa both took this sort of material and created two very different interpretations of the of the poem but use those same characters and there's a couple of songs that you're like, "Oh, that sounds like eerily familiar."

Like there was this amazing source material that became public domain, so it's only only natural that it happened in this way in some ways.

Maddie Orton:

So the source material becomes public domain, and Andrew Lippa, composer, and Michael John LaChiusa, also composer, I mean they must have been writing this show at the exact same time.

Angela Longo:

Yeah.

Maddie Orton:

And the Lippa version goes off-Broadway. LaChiusa version goes to Broadway, and the Lippa version never makes it to Broadway, which is to me, like, I mean, just crazy.

Angela Longo:

Sure. And it and it probably could have if the LaChiusa won hadn't hadn't been already on its trajectory. So who knows? But I do think it's been successful in some ways in the regional theater industry, I guess. But it is a risky show to just like let go out into the into the world of varying directors.

It's it's a difficult show to produce and to direct. So I am always like, "Whew! This show is just available for people to like, pick up and take with them!" It's like, it's like one of these things that I'm like, "Ooh, I'm holding onto this, like, very delicately." I'm like, I care very much that this show gets taken care of and that the audience feels taken care of and the cast feels taken care of when they experience the show.

Maddie Orton:

The other really great thing about the show is just to me, I think the music is just so fabulous. There is actually, I remember years ago, and I'll throw a link in the description if I can find it, but *So You Think You Can Dance*? I think did like a version of the song "Wild Party."

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Angela Longo:
Oh, really?

Maddie Orton:
And I was like, “Oh, this is just so great. The music is just. It's great.”

Angela Longo:
It is. I do think the Lippa version has a lot of great elements of like mirroring Vaudeville, and and just really leaning into that like kind of circus, the cabaret style music. So we did want to lean into that in our production. So we set it backstage of a vaudeville house, like we're really leaning into that. And so, like even in the number of the “Wild Party” which is sung in the script, it's written that it's sung by these two characters named Phil and Oscar, who are these composers. And like, so they're like, ready to, like, put on a show for everyone. So in our production, somewhat due to budget restrictions, but we did cut down the casting so that our Oscar is actually a puppet. And so Phil is like a ventriloquist performer. And so he's like a puppeteer and he has his like his ventriloquist puppet.

So it's it's so funny. It's like a delight. And it's been like, so fun to see this this one number and particularly, like, transform in this way. Like, it just feels very much like Vaudeville and, oh, it's very campy and it's so much fun. Yeah.

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

Maddie Orton:
And what made you choose the wild party this year? Last year you guys did *Xanadu*. Two very different experiences.

Angela Longo:
Fun. So different.

Maddie Orton:
This is a very different show.

Angela Longo:
Mm hmm. Yeah, I last year, I was very much like in a place where it was my first season that I was producing with the company as the new artistic director. And so I wanted to really—and it was like the first time in like two years that the audience had been there. So I was like, “Let's welcome them back with like something really exciting, really fun, like a disco glam party,” which *Xanadu*. And it was like a utopia, like it was beautiful and so much fun to like see somebody zoom by on a roller skate, like what could be better?

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And so this year I was like, Well, yeah, like the same impulse. We're like, I want to, like, keep coming back with, like a, a strong start with, like a party atmosphere, like an exciting glitz and glam because, like, I do think that like coming out of a pandemic and coming out of isolation, like we crave connection. And so we tried to theme this season on creativity, community and connection.

And this show particularly is about community. She does invite this group of people together, but what's underneath all of that is a lot of substance abuse, a lot of violence, a lot of just a lot of numbing, and a lot of inability to connect with people. And so I, I am looking at this show as like this is a little bit of like what's really going on right now in our world, in our society.

I do think that there's a lot of numbing and there's a lot of people that are like beneath the surface just not fully connecting with people anymore. And I do think that that's very present in this show. And we see—we see the results of that and in a sort of stark way in this show. And I think that it proves—there's there's glimmers of hope in this show that just show you that there's like there are people that, like, have this real genuine love, have these real connections in this show who can party and gather in like a safe and responsible way. But we see other people who are who are really failing at that, really failing to connect with people because of how much they're numbing, and how much they're there abusing substances, and and and not fully connecting with people.

So I do think that this show is like our opportunity to like to have that fun experience of community and gathering. But underneath the surface, we're really seeing like, oof, but, but we have some things we need to address. Yeah.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah. And it was funny because I was thinking about sort of that like full circle nature of choosing this particular show in the source material at this time. We're almost at the 100 year anniversary of that. Written, you know, not far after a pandemic, global pandemic, and written in this period where people are just like, you know, coming out of this pandemic and it and yeah, numbing, I'm sure, like in the loss at that time was crazy.

Angela Longo:

Yeah, it it feels like it has a lot of relevance.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah.

Angela Longo:

And the the show at the end asks the question. Queenie asks the question without giving spoilers away, but she asks the question like, "How have we come to this?" And that's like the final question of the

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show. And and I know that, like so many of us have been like, “How have we come to this? Like, where did we go wrong? How did we fail? Like, what could we have done differently?” And and I do think the answer to that, to a lot of it is just like, you know, like understand yourself, understand the people around you really, really get to know people, really connect with people, really ask what people want and what they need, which I think is the biggest failure of the show is that no one is doing that. And we see that pretty painfully in this show.

And I hope that that is something that audiences are able to, like, take away while also getting getting that like getting that awesome experience, and getting that awesome production, and and seeing these really dynamic performances. I mean, I have a hopeful outlook on life, so I hope that I'm not dragging the audience down too too much by producing this particular show. But yeah.

Maddie Orton:

I mean, look, it's a bleak story, but it is a fun party.

Angela Longo:

Exactly.

Maddie Orton:

Well, Angela, thank you so much for chatting. *Wild Party* with me on, like, a lovely Friday morning. I could do this every day. This is great. Thank you.

Angela Longo:

Thank you so much. Is a pleasure.

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

Maddie Orton:

“The Wild Party” at Eagle Theatre runs from February 9th through 26th. For more information, visit eagletheatre.org – that’s theater with an ‘re’.

If you'd liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on JerseyArts.com.

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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 Angela Longo.

I'm Maddie Orton for the *Jersey Arts Podcast*, thanks for listening.



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