



A Homecoming at Crossroads Theatre Company

Transcript

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton, Host:

I'm Maddie Orton, and you are listening to the *Jersey Arts Podcast*. Crossroads Theatre Company's upcoming production of *Chicken & Biscuits* is about coming home. The play itself is a comedy about a family reuniting, and it will run over the holidays as many of us head home to celebrate and hopefully catch some theater with family and friends.

It also feels like a homecoming of sorts to returning Artistic Director Ricardo Khan, who co-founded Crossroads Theatre Company in 1978 and is working with one of his early collaborators, the talented Lynda Gravátt. I had the pleasure of talking with Rick about the show, his return to Crossroads Theatre Company, how the organization began, and what lies ahead. Take a listen.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

So Rick, let's start with the current show that's going up very soon, *Chicken & Biscuits*. I missed it while it was on Broadway and it's, it's so nice to be able to see it nearby my home at Crossroads, which is a place I love and, uh, go back with for a while.

Ricardo Khan, Artistic Director and co-founder, Crossroads Theatre Company:

I know you do and I'm so glad and it's good to be with you too, Maddie. Um, but yeah, *Chicken & Biscuits* is, first of all, it's a show. Uh, we start on the 21st of December and we go until the 31st. And actually the 31st is our closing and a big New Year's Eve celebration. So those who come, get food and they get to celebrate after the show, they get to meet the cast.

Maddie Orton:

Oh, that's so cool.

Ricardo Khan:

And they're also fireworks right outside of our building in New Brunswick, so..

Maddie Orton Oh my gosh!











Yeah, it's gonna be a really great night. But it's, it's also a wonderful show. It's a show that is contemporary. It's about today and about, uh, folks of all ages, uh, today, but it's told by a young writer, uh, Doug Lyons, and it's a comedy—it's a joyous, funny, good time show at a time I thought we needed it.

Maddie Orton:

I was gonna say, it sounds like it might not be, cuz it takes place around a funeral, doesn't it?

Ricardo Khan:

<laugh> Yeah.

Maddie Orton:

It's like, it's a great time...at this funeral!

Ricardo Khan:

It's a, it, it's a Black funeral <laugh>, so it, it's, um, I mean, it, it's a celebration. It's when family comes together, it's, it's, it's when drama happens. And in this case, the drama's pretty funny. So, so the funeral is really just the, um, what brings people together, and the comedy comes from what happens when they come together. And you know what? It doesn't matter who you are, you come and you're gonna relate, you know, whether you're Black or white or gay or straight or, or older or younger. Um, you're gonna relate. It's not religious. It is, uh, it's about, uh, thanksgiving, right? About coming together, about having some *Chicken & Biscuits*, about having, uh, a time to put away all of the chaos of the outside and bring it together in love. And that's what the show is about

Maddie Orton:

Also, so relatable during the holidays, I feel like a lot of people can relate to that experience of coming home.

Ricardo Khan:

Oh, yes. Yeah.

Maddie Orton:

A little bit of chaos, a lot of love, hopefully. Now, how did you come across the show? Did you see the Off-Broadway or Broadway production?

Ricardo Khan:

No, I didn't. I was told about it, and then I asked for the script. I read the script and, and, uh, then I thought about it a little more. I was on a train, and by the time the train trip was done, I thought, 'This, this would be great.' And I was trying to figure out, well, what was it about this show that really was











hitting me so much? And it was, it was the fact that I have had, like all of us, a really tough time in these last two years trying to sort everything out. And I thought, 'Well, this is like a homecoming. This is a reunion. It's something we haven't had in over two years.' I'm, I'm, I'm talking about live theater and coming together in a way that just allows you to laugh and cry and, and just, and have fun with other people, whether you know them or not. By the end of the show, you're gonna know them in the audience. .

Maddie Orton:

Yeah. In terms of the show itself, you brought on director Lynda Gravátt. Have you guys worked together before?

Ricardo Khan:

Oh yes. Quite a bit. She goes way back at Crossroads. Maddie, you're young, but...

Maddie Orton:

<laugh>

Ricardo Khan:

...you know, the first, uh, building of Crossroads was not on Livingston Avenue. It was-

Maddie Orton:

Oh, I know!

Ricardo Khan:

It was on Route 18 when it wasn't even—I don't even know if they called it Route 18, but it was, um, in an old abandoned sewing factory. That's where we started Crossroads. And, uh, and Lynda Gravátt was an actor in some of the shows back then, and then she was also a part of a women's group we had called Sangoma. And she and Sydne Mahone, who was our literary manager, they started working on this—on, on Sangoma—and it just grew into really an international program that we loved.

But I remember Lynda Gravátt from back then, and then other stuff she's done since then. And then she was directing at Crossroads, after I had left she directed, and we did, uh, other stuff together. This is the first time I am actually back at Crossroads with Lynda directing. So it was something I really wanted as, as a person who I knew, she was a great friend, but also a great talent, and I just wanted her here.

Maddie Orton:

For anybody who might not know her name off the top of their heads, you know, she's a, she's a Broadway person, off-Broadway, film—











Ricardo Khan: Television.

Maddie Orton:

Television. I feel like it must be just such an exciting thing for people to get to work with her.

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and this is a great group of people, Maddie, that the cast is excited. They're, they're, they, it's like a, it's, it is like a love feast, every, every, rehearsal with Lynda. But, you know, Ashley Nicole Baptiste and...

Maddie Orton:

Huge fan, huge fan of hers. Personal friend.

Ricardo Khan:

I know! Deja Anderson Ross, uh, has joined us, Candace McCoy, Eddie Blackman, people also know him as, uh, Eddie Murphy, but not that Eddie Murphy, but this our Eddie Murphy.

Maddie Orton:

<affirmative>,

Ricardo Khan:

And then George Roberts, Inga Ballard, Madison McBride, and Matt Dangler. Uh, and together, these eight people make up this, this really diverse and fun cast.

Maddie Orton:

That's great. And, you know, I love an ensemble show.

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Maddie Orton:

For me, that's like, when, if I can see an ensemble comedy, that's like my favorite night at the theater.

Ricardo Khan:

What is it you like the most about that?

Maddie Orton:

I just love watching people play off of each other.











Mm-hmm. <affirmative>,

Maddie Orton:

You know, and when you can see, I mean, you tell me if you feel this way, but when I can see however many people on stage, and everybody has a relationship with the other person, and they're all existing in this bizarre scenario, that's, like, my favorite type of theatrical experience.

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> I think. Yeah. And I think that I, I think you're absolutely right about *Chicken & Biscuits* because Oh my God, I mean, everybody knows this person. They're coming to celebrate, right?

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

Ricardo Khan:

So that means they may or may not know each other. They may think they know each other, and then they find out differently. And then there's some really crazy surprises in the show as well, in terms of people coming in. So there's that sense of ensemble and people knowing each other in this show, even when they think they know each other and they don't. So, so the whole thing becomes a discovery of, of, of folks in the family you took for granted. But in fact, um, uh, you have a lot to learn about them.

And then of course, there's, you know, there's, um, there's a Jewish character in the show who's never set foot in a, in a church before <a hr

Maddie Orton:

Hmm.

Ricardo Khan:

And they show up together. So it's, then there's more < laugh>, there's more, It's, um, it's what we need right now.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:

You talked about returning to Crossroads. Yeah. For you, I mean, this is also kind of a homecoming, right?











It is.
Maddie Orton: As a co-founder.
Ricardo Khan: It seems, I keep coming back. It's, you know, <laugh></laugh>
Maddie Orton: Like that <i>Godfather</i> quote. It's like, every time I think I'm out, they—
Ricardo Khan: They keep, they just pull me back in!
Maddie Orton: <laugh> So where, when did you come back to Crossroads? What brought you back?</laugh>
Ricardo Khan: Well, you know, I left Crossroads in, in–towards the end of 1999, around this time actually in the year. And when we were doing, um, we were doing a musical called <i>Play On!</i> , and it starred Leslie Uggums And, uh, and, and Stephanie Mills, and they were,
Maddie Orton: Oh my gosh!
Ricardo Khan: You know, and it was directed by André De Shields, and it was—
Maddie Orton: Oh my gosh!
Ricardo Khan: And that was the last, that was the last Crossroads show I had done. And, and, and then I was on a plane to Trinidad where I was going to live for a year, and then figure out what I'm gonna do after that.



loved that. And of course, we had just won the Tony Award,

Ricardo Khan:





So when I left, the day I left Crossroads with my last plant in my hand from my office, uh, *Play On!* was playing on, it was, it was a matinee <laugh>. I said, well, I left when the music was still playing, and I





Maddie Orton:

Outstanding Regional Theater

Ricardo Khan:

So it was a good time to go and, uh, and explore the stuff I've, I've never done before, but always wanted to, and, and different cultures in the Caribbean and then South Africa. And that's what I did, um, for a while. And then the theater closed, and from the background—that was about a year later. And from the background, I helped them get back up and going. And during that time, met Marshall Jones and...

Maddie Orton:

Marshall Jones, also one of my favorite people.

Ricardo Khan:

You know, Marshall, I know!

Maddie Orton:

My mentor from Rutgers. I love him.

Ricardo Khan:

He's a mentor to many people. And he was doing that and Crossroads at the same time, uh, after I, I brought him in and he was there for, for, for quite a long time.

I was doing, during that time, I started writing also. And one of the shows that I, I did was *Fly* about the Tuskegee Airmen, and then I did another piece, and that's where I met you, that was *Satchel Page and the Kansas City Swing*. Right?

Maddie Orton:

Yeah.

Ricardo Khan:

And then after that, I did a play called, uh, *Freedom Rider*. So Marshall and I had talked about bringing Freedom Rider to Crossroads for a long time. And then finally in 2020, uh, we did and, and, and, uh, went into rehearsals, all of that. And then that was also around the time Marshall said, Rick, I'm leaving Crossroads. Oh. So, and then came the pandemic.

So we never did it. So the, the point being that at that time, I thought, well, what's gonna happen to Crossroads and where's it gonna go if Marshall's not there? And who's gonna produce my show? <laugh>, Freedom Rider <laugh>. And, and, um, and, and I think that's around when the board asked me could I come back and help them through that year, even though we were online. It was a











wonderful fun year for me because I was doing stuff we never did before online, and we were reaching audiences all over the world. Uh, I, I said, yes, I came back to do that. And, and, uh, and, and I'm still here now.

Maddie Orton:

You know, it's, it's nice to hear any sort of silver lining to pandemic insanity, you know, that you were reaching new audiences is such a nice way of—one nice outcome from that.

Ricardo Khan:

I think so. I, I think I, I mean, I, I look back on those times that forced us to find different ways, but you're talking about different ways to, uh, communicate to people all over the world. Uh, I, I think Zoom zoomed during that time, and, uh, we did a lot of Zoom theater and whatever, what have you, and while it was not our favorite way of doing theater, it was the only way at that time of connecting with other artists.

So yeah, that was, that was interesting because it, it, it allowed us to reach the rest of the world. I mean, why not? And, and, uh, in fact, Marshall and I did during that time, a series called, um, uh, *Stream On*, which was, uh, streaming plays and artists, 10 minute plays from around the world.

Maddie Orton:

Wow.

Ricardo Khan:

Just trying to connect and find out, well, in Mumbai, are you going through what I'm going through here in Hoboken? Things like that. Mm-hmm. Uh, and, and we were able to, to, to find those. But that time was also, uh, turmoil in the streets too, and what was going on, uh, with, you know, with Breonna Taylor and, and George Floyd and everything in reaction to that. So as a, a society, we, I know things opened up for us in terms of our eyes, and I'm here at Crossroads because I want to discover the meaning of those, those discoveries, and how we can somehow share those thoughts and stories on stage.

Maddie Orton:

When you co-founded Crossroads originally. Hmm. And what year was that, Rick?

Ricardo Khan:

78.

Maddie Orton:

78. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> was part of the idea behind founding Crossroads to sort of, you know,











explore stories around social justice and, and areas like that? And this sort of, is it a whole new time to look at that through different eyes, or?

Ricardo Khan:

Yeah. It, it was really, honestly, it was, it's like asking a kid, why do you play ball? You know, it's because it's, it's what you did. Sure. And when, when Lee Richardson and I came out of, out of Mason Gross, uh, what we did was what we were trained to do, which is, as actors and directors and coming out of school saying, okay, now we're totally trained. And you go out there and you find that the roles out there were so limited and limiting to people of color.

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

Ricardo Khan:

And, uh, the images of Black people in America were so negative at the time. The thought was, well, why not do, why not create a place where we can do our work well and, and, and be able to present positive images of who we are as Black people? And to show that Black life and Black culture is relevant to everybody, so it should be shared by everybody. It should be a part of everybody's, uh, world. Just like American history encompasses Black history. Uh, we wanted to bring a, a whole different, uh, experience to people and bring them all together. And that's where we got our name, Crossroads.

Maddie Orton:

Oh, interesting. Yeah. I never, I never thought about that. Interesting.

Ricardo Khan:

Yeah. But, but in reality, we wanted to do our work. We wanted to do what we knew what we were trained to do. We wanted good roles, not just pimps, prostitutes.

Maddie Orton:

Oh my gosh.

Ricardo Khan:

You know, we wanted good roles.

Maddie Orton:

So you would've been in your, what, mid-twenties? Like it was right

Ricardo Khan:

After I was, I was eight years old.











Maddie Orton:

<laugh>, What an action.

Ricardo Khan:

What's your next question? What's your next question?

Maddie Orton:

This was going to be a compliment, by the way, but https://example.com/ but laugh>, so you were, you were two years old in—

Ricardo Khan:

Yes, I was two Years old.

Maddie Orton:

-1978, you were one and a half years old, just out of preschool.

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. < laughs>.

Maddie Orton:

And you were—that's a really big undertaking for two actors to form a company.

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I guess we were like 25. And, you know, I think because I was in school undergraduate for four years, and then because I got my, my degree in acting and directing, it was a double MFA, so it Oh, wow. It took me, so it took me four years to go through that as well.

Maddie Orton:

Wow. That's a cool degree though. I didn't know they did that.

Ricardo Khan:

I loved it. They don't anymore. They don't anymore. But it was, it was double. I had to do two theses. I had to do more work and be there longer, one extra year. But I, I think that the, the point is, you, you have this at that, at that time, a 20 year old or a 25 year old was, was raised to go change the world.

Maddie Orton:

Hmm.

Ricardo Khan:

There, you know, we didn't, we weren't raised in this, uh, period of, well, you know, do whatever you want without making a choice. Right? It's like you had to make a choice. You couldn't be on the fence. Were you, for the Vietnam War or against the Vietnam War? You couldn't just say, I don't know. Were











you, were you for civil rights or against civil rights? Were you for Malcolm X or were you for Martin Luther King? Were you going to, um, you know, when you're, when you were drafted, are you gonna go to, to, to, to war? Or are you gonna go to Canada? You know, I, I mean, all of these things, these elements of that time caused you to choose. And so you were in a constant state of decision making and movement some way, one way or another. But forward and Crossroads was, was simply a, a decision to do it our way.

Maddie Orton:

I mean, I think that's incredible, but I, you know, it's also incredible to me because you studied theater, you studied directing, but nonprofit organization work is its own thing, you know, and then it's management, and it's casting and all this stuff that you probably had to learn on the fly, right?

Ricardo Khan:

We did. I mean, we learned as we went. We do not, we didn't have a casting director in the beginning. We didn't have, um, a business manager or anything like that in the beginning. We had to learn all of that. I was more of the person who, uh, you know, basically Lee loved acting more than he loved directing in the beginning.

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Ricardo Khan:

And then he learned directing. I loved directing and producing more than I loved acting at the time. But we all, but we did it all. And part of the producing for me was not wanting to be beholden to anybody else.

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

Ricardo Khan:

Whatever it is. So, so if you're gonna do it, do it yourself. And that's what I would do when I was growing up in, in Camden, in South Jersey. Uh, and we would do shows on the streets and block off the streets and do plays. But it was, it was, um, it was doing it, doing it our own way and doing it ourselves. So as we, uh, started, the only thing we knew was we gotta do this. And then we learned as we went.

Maddie Orton:

How did you get that building space, the one on 18? Because I know people, I was not there, but my parents went to that space. And I know that you have a, at least in the old Crossroads building, there was a portrait right? Of that space, the original space in the building.











Uh, yeah. Before we left the old building, the first building, I commissioned an artist, Leroy Campbell, to actually paint the space.

Maddie Orton:

Hmm.

Ricardo Khan:

And paint it in a way that, that, that would bring us memories of, of who we were at our root. And, uh, and that's that. Yeah. That's what he, what he did. I don't know where it is now. It may be in the offices or somewhere, but it was a pretty big painting.

And his style is to, to do figures who all have like, um, like lollipops. They have like a thin neck.

Maddie Orton:

Right. I remember that.

Ricardo Khan:

And one ball for a head. And the, and, and the ball of the head was, they were all Black, but the, all of the, all of the, the bodies were all different colors.

Maddie Orton:

Interesting.

Ricardo Khan:

Yeah. And what, and I think that's what he was trying to say, is that there's a Black culture here, but embodied by everybody.

Maddie Orton:

Well, you know, my, my favorite thing about that painting is you would see, um, audience members, you know, trickle in before the show, and without fail, every time I was in that space, near that painting, I would hear somebody go, 'I remember that building. I remember those stairs.'

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>,

Maddie Orton:

'I remember, blah, blah.' And whenever I would go with my parents, they also are those patrons who point out the picture and say, 'I was there.'











Yes.

Maddie Orton:

And it's so nice. Cause I think people, you know, you have a kinship and a love with an organization, and then when you see the organization grow, it's almost like, it's exciting to be the person who says, you know, 'I was there when it first started. I saw that building. I was there.'

And now you guys are in a, a brand new building, right?

Ricardo Khan:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> mm-hmm. <affirmative>,

Maddie Orton:

New Brunswick Performing Arts Center?

Ricardo Khan:

Yeah. It's a, it's a gorgeous building. The facilities are amazing. It's state of the art in every way. And you walk in and you say, 'wow.' It's just, it's just a gorgeous place to be. And there's a lot of glass. So you could see out onto the, the monument, uh, Monument Square. And people on the outside, especially in the evening when the lights are on, can see inside in what's going on. So I, I think a performing arts center should be alive like that. And I think they did a great job in being able to, uh, portray that.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:

What do you have coming up in the spring that people should look out for?

Ricardo Khan:

Well, in the spring, we're doing, first of all, we're doing *The Genesis Festival* in April.

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

Ricardo Khan:

And that's, that's been going on for a long time. And that's, uh, a new, new play reading festival. And then after that, in May, June, we're turning one theater, the smaller theater into a jazz club. Right. And in that jazz club, we're going to be doing three productions. One, *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*. Ah, all right. Which is, uh, you know, Billie Holiday. And then we're bringing in, an amazing artist, Samara











Joy, who is, uh, going to be doing a tribute to Sarah Vaughan. And then after that production, we're going to be doing a production that is, uh, a tribute to Nina Simone.

Maddie Orton: Oh my gosh.
Ricardo Khan: Yeah. So that's all going to be in that one theater. And at the same time, while that's happening in the larger theater, we're doing a brand new play, uh, that is, is written and performed by Divinity Roxx. And Divinity Roxx was Beyonce's bass player.
Maddie Orton: Oh, wow.
Ricardo Khan: And, and at one time, musical director. So when I met her last year, I said, 'Well, is there a story there?' <laugh> She said, 'Yeah.' So this is her story.</laugh>
Maddie Orton: Wow.
Ricardo Khan: She's a young artist, an incredible performer, a female bass player. And this is, this is her story, and it's called <i>StarChild: The Ballad of Debbie Walker</i> . So all of this stuff is happening at Crossroads at the same time in what we call the Crossroads Festival Theater.
Maddie Orton: I can't wait. This is so exciting. Well, I'm gonna mark my calendars.
Ricardo Khan: Okay.
Maddie Orton: Rick, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. It's such a pleasure. Always.
Ricardo Khan: I love it. And it's great to see you again.



[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]









Maddie Orton:

Chicken & Biscuits runs from December 21st through the 31st with a big closing performance on New Year's Eve. For more information on the show, visit CrossroadsTheatreCompany.org. That's 'theatre' with an 're'.

If you 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. *The Jersey Arts Podcast* is presented by ArtPride, New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986.

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





