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How Basement Productions Prepared Sarah Rasmussen for McCarter

Transcript

[MUSIC]

Maddie Orton, Host:

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. Sarah Rasmussen has been rehearsing for her role as McCarter Theatre's Artistic Director pretty much her whole life. From auditioning kids in the backyard of her South Dakota home, to presenting her artistry on major stages across the country, Sarah has maintained her sense of playfulness with the art form. Now her McCarter Theatre directorial debut, "Ride the Cyclone", combines that whimsy with music, stunning design, and a perfect story for this moment in time. Here's my interview with Sarah Rasmussen.

Maddie Orton:

Sarah, welcome to New Jersey! I know you've been here for a little bit, but I haven't met you yet. I'm very excited to have you here.

Sarah Rasmussen, Artistic Director of McCarter Theatre Center:

Very excited to be here. Thanks.

Maddie Orton:

How have you found the Garden State so far?

Sarah Rasmussen:

It's beautiful. I have to say as someone who lived in the New York City area for a while, I didn't fully appreciate how much was an hour away from me outside of New York. It's incredible.



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Maddie Orton:

Honestly, I feel like we get that a lot. I'm biased, but, I think we get that a lot from New Yorkers. I'm glad to hear that.

Sarah Rasmussen:

I especially love this time of year when everything is blooming. And fingers crossed that the magnolias get a second chance here. They got a little thwarted by an early freeze.

Maddie Orton:

Let's talk a little bit about your role with McCarter. You're taking over for the lovely and talented Emily Mann, who has been such a part of McCarter. What drew you to the organization, and how do you feel about stepping into these shoes and giving it a, I don't know, a new voice?

Sarah Rasmussen:

I was so aware of McCarter in our national landscape. Um, although I'd never directed at McCarter, I had gotten to see some work here a while back. And just, McCarter is so, so legendary in the theater landscape for, you know, of course the work that Emily did, especially around champion new voices, new work. Uh, I also knew of McCarter, frankly, as a female director and artistic director, as a place that had just been so hospitable to launching the careers and sustaining the careers of so many female artists, and artisans, and arts administrators over the years. So many favorite favorite folks in the field had worked at McCarter. So Mara Isaacs, Liz Engelman, who's a fantastic new play dramaturg, my agent Mark Orsini was on the literary staff, and of course it's, it's wonderful to be back in the larger New York city area. There're so many artists that I love working with that are based in this, in this region.

And it's been really wonderful to get to know New Jersey artists and artists that make their home in this state as well. So it's, um, it's felt both like a great adventure and also like a natural next step at the same time, which has been good in a very, in a very stressful time in COVID, it's been good to feel like, okay, even though these are not ideal times for the arts, it's a great, uh, it's a great long term move for me and for my family.



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Maddie Orton:

You talk about COVID, it has been such a time of flux and change in every possible way, and certainly in theater, especially. How was transitioning during that period for you?

Sarah Rasmussen:

Um, it was awful, thanks for asking! I mean, it was just like...

Maddie Orton:

<laugh> I like to bring up the good stuff.

Sarah Rasmussen:

No, it's so, it was such a wild ride because I got offered the job, um, late February of 2020. So just literally days before the world started to shut down. And while I was still really excited about it, I'm not gonna lie, it was a really hard transition because everyone was working remotely. So, um, so I was meeting new colleagues over Zoom. We were trying to lead--you know, any of us in, in arts management--were really in crisis management for, for many, many months. And that was, that was hard. It was hard to get to know an organization when we weren't doing what we normally do, you know, like connecting with audience and connecting with artists.

But I absolutely love the staff at McCarter. I have so much respect for them, and I think we all pivoted, and with wonderful thinkers on our board too, of just like, 'How do we use this time really wisely?' How do we, in a time of a lot of transition for McCarter in terms of leadership, in terms of the upheaval of the pandemic, in terms of also the, the larger conversations happening in our field around equity, around inclusion, around diversity, around access, like how do we take this time and really strategize what we want the organization to be moving forward so that we are, um, as ready as possible once it's safe to come back?' And I'm really proud of the work we did. We did deep, deep dive, strategic planning, which I, even in the interview process had talked about, like, that's really important in a time of transition. When I was an artistic director in, in Minnesota, I had also taken over for somebody who'd been there for 25 years, and Emily had been at the organization for 30 years. And it's very important to me to both honor that legacy, but also say, 'Let's really, as a community, wrap our heads around what are our next steps, and what do we want to,



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what do we want to carry with us? And what are things we want to, uh, question in this time? And, and I think, like I said, given the amount of cultural conversation going on, it was a really rich time for meeting, over Zoom, with a lot of community groups, with artists, with different stakeholders in different communities around us to say, 'What do you hope to see out of an arts organization in 2021, 2022, and the years beyond?' And, and we really used that dialogue to go back to the and envisioned values and say, let's both carry on that legacy and reignite this for a new era.

[MUSIC from "Ride the Cyclone"]

Maddie Orton:

New voices are a big focus of yours and of McCarter's. Tell me about "Ride the Cyclone".

Sarah Rasmussen:

I'm so excited to share "Ride the Cyclone" with audiences. I feel like it's exactly the, the sort of theater that we need right now. It's really funny. It's really joyful. It's really life affirming. It's a young cast of, um, six young actors and then one, uh, older actor who plays a narrator. And these six kids are just, I say kids, 'cause they're way younger than me. <laugh> Um, but they're just so they're so amazing. They've got just this incredible voices, and incredible energy, and the piece is it's so wonderful, and kind of ridiculous and surreal and funny, but also, um, also has a real deep heart around, around gratitude, around asking, 'What makes a life well lived?' And I think that's something so many of us have been thinking about in the last two years of what, what does really matter? What does bring me joy? What does bring my life meaning?

Maddie Orton:

And I won't give too much away, but the plot focuses on six high school students?

Sarah Rasmussen:

Six high school kids. Yeah.

Maddie Orton:



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Who ride the Cyclone, which is a ride. And tell me, tell me a little bit what happens.

Sarah Rasmussen:

It's a pretty surreal story of six kids in a small town in Canada are in a glee club, and they're singing at an amusement park, and they go on a ride, and the ride breaks and they end up flying into this sort of afterlife purgatory where they're in an abandoned warehouse of the carnival years later. And there's a, a fantastical, uh, sort of fortune teller character. And we get to learn through this sort of game that the fortune teller starts with them, like, what they wish they could have shared with us on Earth, and what was their deepest, most authentic truth that they didn't share with anyone else.

And through the course of it, I don't think it's a spoiler, they go from being strangers to really, um, becoming this community and reflecting on what does make life worth living. And well, it's a little bit of a, a bittersweet setup, it has the, I think effect on the audience of like, 'Oh, we're still here. We get to do this. We get to go out into a beautiful spring day and make choices about how we want to live our lives, and how we want to connect with other people.' And that feels powerful in this time sort of as a ritual to both name, 'Yeah, hard things happen in life, and also really wonderful things happen as well.'

Maddie Orton:

Oh sure. And I think being your authentic self in a way that you're not presenting to the rest of the world is probably super resonant for young people, but honestly, for everybody,

Sarah Rasmussen:

For all of us! For all of us, right? Like the courage to say, 'You know what, I haven't really shared this, but this is, this is something that really matters to me.' I also, there's some, there's some beautiful, beautiful connections in "Ride the Cyclone" to Thornton Wilder's "Our Town", which is one of my all-time favorite plays. And in a very, very cool connection, "Our Town" premiered at McCarter in 1938. And I've always, always loved that piece. And I think one of the things I love about it is that the character of Emily Webb is a young woman who passes away too young and is looking at her life from the other side and, and sort of seeing everyone bustle about and be worried about the things they're worried about and all of that. And, and, and she says like, 'You know, just stop and look at it. Look at what you really have while you have it. And she asks the Stage Manager, you know, 'Do real people really realize they're living their life every moment while they're living it?' And the Stage Manager says, 'Well, the saints and poets, they do some.' And I think that, that to me just



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feels like it's at the heart of "Ride the Cyclone" too, of just like, just look at what you have while you have it, even in the, even in the messiness of it, that it is a gift as well. So I'm super excited about it.

It also has the most incredible theatrical design that I've gotten to work on, I think, in any show. Our designers are amazing...

Maddie Orton:

Yeah, tell me a little bit about that. I saw some of the images-- absolutely gorgeous. The lighting, the scene work...

Sarah Rasmussen:

Yeah. Like I said, it's a musical is set as if you took a whole carnival and packed it away in a magical warehouse. And there's so many tricks in it. And there's so many-- there's lights, and projections, and video, and everything moves in kind of unexpected ways. Um, I'm not gonna give away some, some truly magical things that also happen. There's some magic tricks in it as well. Um, it's also the kind of show I I've worked on it once before and this, this production is allowing me to really expand upon my vision of it. And it's the kind of show that I'd say it's kind of rated PG 13, but it's something you can bring a younger person to, high school kids love it, college kids love it, and older adults love it too. And I think that's really special when there's a musical that can be intergenerational like that. I love audiences that are filled with, um, with a whole mix of different life experiences that can all find a ride to go on within, uh, within the larger ride of the musical.

Maddie Orton:

So this is your second time producing and directing "Ride the Cyclone". What have you found in doing the show a second time, different location, different cast?

Sarah Rasmussen:

Oh, it's so different because I think theater pieces always resonate different with the contemporary moment. I'd say it feels more poignant than it did two years ago because of our collective experience of sort of feeling stuck, like the way these kids get stuck and, and, and have to a sort of, you know, wrestle with their frustration over that their hopes and dreams and, and, and, and what they hope happens, you know, next.



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And, um, I think there's also other resonances. There's an incredible Ukrainian character in the piece. Um, there's Ukrainian folk music in the piece. There's, I mean like that, that just in this moment, just, you know, we're, we're feeling the like, 'Oh, wow.' You know, to, to honor that culture with this piece feels, feels both very powerful and also like, you know, a real artistic responsibility to do that in a really respectful way. Um, I think we've also, you know, we've also really, like I said, expanded the, the design in the piece, the casting in the piece, and just, I think continued to, to let it blossom in really interesting ways... And I can't say we're at, but Cyclone's going to have more of a life after McCarter, too. And that's been fun to be an incubator for projects that then go on and leave Princeton and go on to have a life elsewhere, which is, I think a special part of McCarter's history and one we definitely want to continue.

[MUSIC: "Ride the Cyclone"]

Maddie Orton:

You mentioned, this is all about authenticity for, for teenagers being their true selves. You got into theater pretty young, right? Who were you as a teenager, if you were riding the Cyclone, what would your true self have been?

Sarah Rasmussen:

That's such a great, that's such a great question. I keep telling these beautiful young artists were such great musical theater actors. I said that would've always been my dream, like as a teenager would be, you know, to have gotten to be in a musical or, you know, be part of that. And it just wasn't the world I grew up in. I grew up in a very, very small town, um, with, with really limited access to live art, but I fell in love with theater and, and in part like loved--I listened to a lot of musical cast recordings as a kid.

But I, I think, you know, I think looking back, you know, what was hard was just like, 'Oh, I'm in this place where I can't, I can't access or do what I love,' but that really spurred me then to just create it myself. So I started directing as a teenage girl and, and, um, did, did a lot of really big productions. Like by the time I was graduating high school, I was doing, I was with 40, 50 people in them and kind of, you know, with, with what I had, and then just kept doing it. I mean, until the pandemic, that was the like, longest hiatus I've ever taken from directing.

Maddie Orton:



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Shows with 40 and 50 person casts when you were in high school?

Sarah Rasmussen:

Yeah.

Maddie Orton:

Can you elaborate on that? Because I think there are probably high school nerds, uh, you know, as I was a high school theater nerd, for sure, who would love to do that! Like where, where is this in your backyard? Was this at your high school? Like what happened here?

Sarah Rasmussen:

Yeah, so, like I said, I grew up in a small town in South Dakota, it's a town of about 2,000 people in Northern South Dakota, and there was an amazing-- they still, they still are in existence-- a group called Missoula Children's Theater, that would travel the country and go into schools for a week. And they'd cast just a ton of kids and do a project within a week. And that is something that our school brought in. That was the one kind of theater thing we got each year. And I think I was really inspired by like, 'Okay, if they can do that, you know, I can figure this out.' And so I would find large cast scripts and, and, you know, cast them mainly with other kids, you know, kids ages like five to 18.

And, um, but then I found that so many kids wanted to do this and I never had the heart to turn any kid away. Like if a kid wanted to be in the play, I would write a part into the play for them, you know, or if they wanted to work backstage, I'd find a thing for them. I just was like, cuz I think I knew what it felt like, you know of like, I just wanna do this thing. And so, so it just kind of snowballed at first I was, I was getting the rights to existing plays, but you know, large house was a like 13 people, 16 people. And I had 25 kids that showed up, or I had 30 kids--backyard auditions. Right? I was very unsupervised. I had a very unsupervised life. There was a lot of space in South Dakota! So, you know, we'd be in the backyard, like auditioning these and then we, um, we would do them in a large, um, uh, sort of basement <laugh> it's like early work as a director with a pole in the middle of the basement, kinda thing, negotiating that for sure.



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But I would do the costumes and I, you know, or I'd work with friends of mine to do that stuff. And for a while, my two best friends were involved in it. We'd like put it all together or somebody's mom was good at sewing, and my mom wasn't good at sewing, but she like would just let me kind of have the run of the house to you, you know, make all my stuff. And um, and then we would, we would take them to the local school. We didn't have a theater, we had one of those like big old gyms, but there was kind of a stage on one side.

Maddie Orton:
Yeah, sure.

Sarah Rasmussen:
So, so we'd set up there and you know, there was some lighting and my brother did all the tech stuff and the lighting and um, and yeah, we, and then, I mean, what was really meaningful for me was that there'd be, you know, dozens and dozens of kids on stage performing, but for kids in the audience, it was oftentimes their first time seeing live theater too.

Maddie Orton:
Wow.

Sarah Rasmussen:
And so, um, so it was really, it, it was really, it was really special. And I think looking back to, I always felt like it, the spirit of it was like a gift to the kids performing in it and a gift to the community. And, um, you know, I felt very compelled. Like I grew up in a place that didn't have the resources of Princeton, New Jersey and felt like I want, I want to create beauty. I wanna create beauty and meaning and laughter and share that, um, with a community. And I think, I think that's still where, where my desire to, to direct and to lead an organization comes from.

Maddie Orton:

What was teen Sarah artistic director's pinnacle experience? Like, what was the show where you were like, 'This is it,' and in many ways probably maybe found your aesthetic. Is that possible at that age?

Sarah Rasmussen:



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That's a great question. I mean, I think sometimes maybe my aspirations maybe weren't totally in sync yet...

Maddie Orton:

That's fair. That's my life all the time now. So I understand.

Sarah Rasmussen:

Always, always! It's interesting, like to think about those, those early impulses. Like I loved "Our Town" as a kid. My mom was an English teacher, so she turned me onto it and there was an incredible version that was on "Great Performances" on PBS when I was a preteen, um, with Spalding Gray as the Stage Manager, and just an amazing cast of people. And I loved it so much and I recorded it off of PBS and I'd make my friends watch it at sleepovers, which is like, this tells you everything...t

Maddie Orton"

<laugh> And they were like, "Guys, don't go to sleepovers at Sarah's house. She'll make you watch 'Our Town!'"

Sarah Rasmussen:

Theater nerd! I was like, no, really to my friends, I was like, 'This is so good. This is everything, you know, like we have to watch this!' You know? Um, so on one hand I had this sort of like, 'Life, it goes by so fast,' you know, I'm in like fifth grade and I'm like, 'life, it goes by so fast. We don't have time to look at it!' Um, so it was pretty intense in that way. Um, but, but also I think there was a silliness and a joy, you know, I mean, I, I look back on my childhood and, and it was a little bit like growing up in the 'Royal Tanenbaums' house. Like it was like, you know, just like a, kind of a kind of free range, um, you know, uh, experience of like, we didn't have that much stuff in our town, but we just made, made stuff.

And, and so that's great. And so there was a real silliness and, and I think for me, one of the reasons that I, I started directing, I got really serious that I think about like seventh grade and stuff <laugh> and looking back, I'm like, oh, it's kind of the age where like, it's no longer cool to play dress up with your friends after school, but I'm like, I think I kinda still just wanna play, dress up some and like live in that world of imagination. So, you know, looking back, I'm like, I, I have this very clear memory of like being in my adapting, 'Alice in Wonderland', while listening to 'Rent'. And the



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other day I was like, <laugh>, that's 'Ride the Cyclone'! It is like 'Alice in Wonderland' meets 'Rent'!

Maddie Orton:

Oh my gosh!

Sarah Rasmussen:

And I do think like, as artists, like a lot of those early impulses, you know, are, are there from the beginning. And for me it was, you know, this sort of like deeper wonder, and meaning, and rich spirituality up against 'how much fun can we have?' 'How colorful can it be?' You know, 'how theatrical can it be?' So thank God for musicals. They'll let you bring like the big questions and the big fun together. And now I'm hooked. And I just feel like once, once you get to play with that many things in a room, it's, you know, it's hard to go back. So yeah.

Maddie Orton:

Well, I'm so excited for you and I'm so excited for McCarter. The show sounds great. And congratulations!

Sarah Rasmussen:

Thank you. It's so wonderful to speak with you, Maddie,

Maddie Orton:

For more information on "Ride the Cyclone", visit McCarter.org. If you liked this episode, be sure to 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 at 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 McCarter Theatre. I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening!