

## Prosecast Podcast with Drew Lichtenberg and Ethan McSweeney

Drew Lichtenberg: Have you been slowly revisiting the material or are you waiting until you get here to kind of dive back in?

Ethan McSweeney: I'm trying to decide if I should give you the honest answer or not. The truth is, we had to revisit it when we were casting for this edition. So I did go back and look at what we had done and reviewed all that material and stuff like that. [...] I haven't done a comprehensive go back and review my notes and watch the videotape yet, I sort of was saving that until next week.

DL: Have your thoughts on the show changed from three years ago?

EM: You know, I approached it as a remount, although I think it will inevitably change around some new performers. But you have to start from, "This is what we did the last time," and then find ways to improve it. The advantage we have this time is we know where we're going. Last time I had to make it up. We were inventing a lot ... the flying piano, learning how to use the space. We spent a considerable amount of time on just how does this fairy move and what does that look like, these numbers that are not quite dances but also are movement-inflected.

DL: It really did seem like you guys built from scratch last time. What discoveries did you make during that initial process?

EM: Yeah, I remember wonderful moments ... We ended up switching the fairy arrival scene around with a piece of music that was written for a different place in the play, and it worked great. I think the last time was so much about the invention. Not just for the fairies. We made a discovery about the costume change at the end for Oberon and Titania, as they transition back into fairyland from Theseus and Hippolyta.

The discovery about the lovers and the mud fight. Talk about R & D! We started with the notion that I wanted a mud fight and six weeks later we finally came up with a proprietary blend that could look convincing, not damage the actors, and come out of clothes.

Also, a lot of the fairy costumes themselves were created by Jen [Moeller, the Costume Designer] out of remnants from the shop, because the intention was for the fairies to have scavenged from this abandoned backstage world. So, this time around we know that world. Again, I've got a new actor for Oberon, a new actor for Bottom, I've got all new lovers, we've got a bunch of people who we need to give the same amount of opportunity to come into the world and explore it and create a rhythm. Fortunately we've got the extraordinary Adam Green back as Puck and the equally extraordinary Sara Topham back as Titania, not to mention the pivotal First Fairy Nancy Anderson ... [A bit of an inside joke, Nancy and Ethan are married and in this production the role of the First Fairy is an important one]

DL: And the timeless Ted Van Griethuysen.

EM: Indeed. So we've got some great anchor points which is really important for a revival, but it's equally as exciting to me that we've got some new people too. We're not just going to be sitting there trying to remake the same thing. We're going to make it fresh and new.

Hanging from chandeliers; that was another thing that was a massive R & D project. There was no menu to go to for designing an apparatus that looked like a chandelier but the actor could swing on it. It was not something that had really been done before and Mark Fry, god bless him, built the mock-up and we spent a lot of time in the theatre hanging around on it and fashioning it. Nancy and Adam figuring out where they needed pads and what they needed to be able to slither in and out of it.

DL: It sounds almost like you started with some visual ideas of things you wanted to see and then it was a very practical process of how do we actually make those things work. Sort of like Ariel, the harness you guys built for Sofia—

EM: You know that's true, and the fact is that we then went into *Tempest* with a little more confidence in our ability to start with an idea that we didn't know actually how it was going to work and that we would be able to find it.

That's partly my job. My job is to have the vision and to say that's where we want to go folks, let's try and get there. You know, in rehearsal we had no idea how climbing on the set was going to work; now we do. I think we'll have the ability to start several weeks ahead in terms of that process.

DL: That's the theatrical process, isn't it? You start with these kind of crazy ideas, like I want to make a piano fly, or I want to have fairies climbing walls, I want it to be truly magical. And then it's this laborious physical process of realizing it. And then when you see the final product you're like, oh, yeah, that's the original idea I had. It's this magical thing that just happens.

EM: Well, when I look at the ... we made an archival video, which I'm allowed to watch, because I'm the director and I'm remounting it... we need to be careful how we handle that because it's not supposed to be allowed out of the safe in his office or whatever.

DL: Right.

EM: But there are, you know, ways. And when I watch it I have the experience I sometimes have when I go to the closing performance of a show. I can see all the strata of the rock. The audience sees the results but I can see a moment and remember when we first imagined it, remember when we first got the actor working with us, remember when it didn't work ... There's something magical about watching something you worked on very closely. You have a slightly out-of-time, out-of-body experience. You remember all the steps at the same time that you're actually witnessing the thing happening. And that can be, that can be great. Sometimes that's a little, it can be a little bit... I'm not sure. I might get a little emotional at times because you can feel the work that went into it.

And again, you know, as you mention it I'm like oh my gosh, the trap doors. By the time we came to *The Tempest* we were revisiting a few of those ideas and were like, now we know how to do this stuff. We really had never done multiple trap doors with different events underneath them, including trampolines, if you remember.

We were in a position with that show where most of what we did in the rehearsal hall was kind of a sketch. It didn't really start to take shape until we got onto the stage, which was specifically

engineered with theatrical tools that could allow us to treat it like a playground and a jungle gym, to go above it, below it, within it, step outside of it.

We were able to make all the different stories work equally well: fairies, lovers, and mechanicals. And getting back to the Mechanicals, that's going to be very interesting, to reinvent that particular play-within-a-play. A lot of it was built around the specific actors. Fortunately we have Herschel Sparber coming back, because I wouldn't know where else to find a seven-foot wall. And we've got Chris Bloch back too. We've got a real preponderance on the Mechanicals returning to help us out there.

DL: What was neat about the original casting was it was all these old hands of the theatre, like this old repertory company.

EM: And it's still the same way. I didn't want to change the ages or the overall gestalt of things. That's all still the same. It was important to me that Helena was still quite tall and Hermia was not. I have some tremendous actors coming in to play the lovers that I'm really excited about, two more wonderful alums of my Chautauqua program. We've got a really good group, I think, and it will be fun for them because they're all new to it. They all get to step in and start fresh together.

DL: You know, you've directed more shows in the Harman than any other director. And it's almost like you've set a visual template for the company in there for us. Finding ways to open up Shakespeare in, you know, a huge theatre. It's not really a question; it's just more of an observation.

EM: I would say that over the years of directing Shakespeare in the Harman one of the things that we have been learning, as a company, is how to work that space. It's been really gratifying to grow into that space with the Shakespeare Theatre. I remember when we first started in the Lansburgh and it was a similar process where it took multiple seasons, frankly, for the theatre to grow into a different space, to learn its idiosyncrasies, to embrace them, to find the work-arounds which every theatre space demands. And I do feel like over the years, with very different material, we've started to really break the Harman in. It can be such a great space, especially for Shakespeare. The actors feel a profound sense of intimacy with the audience despite the scale of the theatre. And what's going to be great is that *Free For All* is usually full, and when that theatre is full to bursting there's a sort of cyclonic energy that occurs between the balcony and the orchestra and the stage that's really electrifying.

I was really proud of the *Midsummer* when we did it at the time. It represented a coming-together, a fusing of a whole bunch of different things I'd been working on as a classical theatre director. So I'm just very happy to be sharing it again. It's kind of like getting to go visit an old friend.

We're always a bit cursed by ephemera. It's the nature of what I do that it doesn't last forever, which is fine, nothing lasts forever. That's how it is. But when you get to do something a second time, you get a chance to give it a little longer life. That's very appealing.

DL: It's like you said about watching the final performance, you have lived with the show, you've seen it not work, you've seen things work brilliantly. There's a sense of almost sadness to

it. I think it's similarly reflected in the play itself, when everyone wakes up from the night and tries to recall the dream they had. It's such a rich metaphor for the experience of the theatre

EM: Yes. And I'm sure that is almost exactly what Shakespeare intended. There is something gained and also something lost. You're glad to have had the experience, but you can't go back to it. In our case, we do get to go back to it, but a little bit differently.

I haven't done many remounts of my own work, to perfectly honest. I guess *The Persians* would be the only one. That was several years later, and that was a revisiting as much as a remount. It'll be interesting to see, as we redo it, where I've changed. I'm sure I'll find some places where I'm like, "I wouldn't do it that way anymore." But I remember great joy in doing it...

The other great thing for me personally is to be a part of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Free For All because I was there for the first one. I was the Intern-Director/Child-Wrangler for *Merry Wives of Windsor*. I got to do it as Michael's Associate, got to remount several productions, and I always enjoyed it because you would go in and be able to say this is what happened last time but now we can do this or let's try this thing. We would often find improvements the second time around.

DL: That has to be a crazy thing, to be able to revisit something that you've experienced over the last 25 years.

EM: What's really crazy is that it was 25 years ago. That's absolutely insane.

DL I will not emphasize that in the piece for sure.

EM: You may, you may. I can't walk away from the fact that I've been doing this for a while. But that was definitely ... if it were the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary I would have been okay but somehow I saw it was the 25<sup>th</sup> and I was like, "What?!"

DL: The fact that you were old enough to be an adult or a young adult for the first one, which was 25 years ago, that must be one of those things where you look back and you're like, "Man, time is a funny thing."

EM: Yep, it's a funny funny thing. But anyway, I'm really excited about it. You know, this is a great play for families, it's a great multi-generational play, it's great for student audiences. It's obviously one of the greatest plays for all ages in the canon. So it's a particularly good Free For All.