

(MUSIC)

ANDREW SMITH: Welcome to the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

(MUSIC)

DREW LICHTENBERG: Hello, and welcome to the Prosecast of the Shakespeare Theater Company for "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." This is Episode Two of the 2013-14 Season. This is your chance to explore the upcoming show on your own free time. I am Drew Lichtenberg, the Literary Associate at the Shakespeare Theatre Company, and the, I guess, the Production Dramaturge on this production of "Forum," and I am joined not by Hannah Hessel, our beloved, dearly missed, uh, Audience Enrichment Manager, who is sick today, but I am joined instead by Garrett Anderson.

GARRETT ANDERSON: Hi there.

LICHTENBERG: Say hi to people, Garrett.

ANDERSON: Hi to the people. (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: Garrett, do you wanna introduce yourself?

ANDERSON: Yeah, well, you already introduced Garrett Anderson, so, uh, I am the Artistic Fellow here at Shakespeare Theatre this season; done quite a bit of work dramaturgically with, with you, Drew, and, yeah, excited to be here, excited to do the Prosecast.

LICHTENBERG: Okay, so normally how this works is Hannah interviews me—

ANDERSON: Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: —and I talk sort of about the show, so, you know, I'm gonna try to host, but also have Garrett interview me—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and Andy Smith, our beloved tech, can interject—

SMITH: Hi, everyone.

LICHTENBERG: —if we're getting off of track.

ANDERSON: There you go.

LICHTENBERG: Hannah wants me to reassure our listeners that she will be back for the next episode. She's also getting married on Sunday—

ANDERSON: Woo hoo!

LICHTENBERG: —so she will be Hannah Hessel Ratner, I think, officially.

ANDERSON: Okay.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, okay.

ANDERSON: Cool. Great.

LICHTENBERG: So, “Forum.” Garrett, what do you have to ask me about “Forum?”

(LAUGHTER)

ANDERSON: Well, I, I figured that we would, we would start things off and just, like, set the record straight. Although I don't know if I've ever heard anyone actually call it—an issue—the short version. People just generally refer to this as “Forum,” right, not “Funny Thing?” Just to, just to, like, set the record straight, and make sure that is, in fact, what it is. It's just, we're just going to call this “Forum,” right?

LICHTENBERG: I think, uh, I think, uh, I'm gonna have to issue a diktat—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and say that it is officially “Forum.”

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: When you, when you talk about this show, nobody says “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.” They say, “Oh, I'm in ‘Forum,’” at Shakespeare Theatre in DC—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —this Winter.

ANDERSON: Right, and all, and all of the literature that, that Sondheim has written about “Forum,” he refers to it as “Forum,” correct?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, or he might have another name for it, but, I'm not, I'm not sure it's “Funny Thing.”

ANDERSON: Right. (Laughs) Well, then, then, then, we can, we can move on from that and say, more importantly, what people are thinking about. It's like, this is a huge, giant, glittery, jazz-handy musical that Shakespeare Theatre is not, generally, used to doing, so why, why, in fact, are we doing it? Why is Shakespeare Theatre producing something this is very, just typical Broadway?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. It's interesting. "Forum" most people know from the 1962 Tony award-winning original production, starring Zero Mostel, which ran for two years and a thousand—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —almost a thousand performances, and then, there was the 1994 revival on Broadway with Nathan Lane—

ANDERSON: —and then Whoopi Goldberg, right?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, who I think—I think Whoopi Goldberg took over for Nathan Lane.

ANDERSON: Right, exactly.

LICHTENBERG: Jeffery Rush has played the role of Pseudolus—

ANDERSON: —in Australia, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —in Australia. So, yeah, it's generally, it's seen as a big, jazzy Broadway musical. Not really jazzy, is it?

ANDERSON: Not jazzy, but just jazz hands.

LICHTENBERG: Jazz hands.

ANDERSON: That's more of the, I think that's the better way of putting—

LICHTENBERG: —But, yeah, it's a, it's a musical. It's a musical, and it's not only that; it's a musical comedy.

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: It's a, and it's a frothy, slapstick, low, farcical musical comedy.

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: Um, but—

ANDERSON: But the fact that it's a musical, and we're, and we don't generally do them, so why, why, in fact, musical now?

LICHTENBERG: Well, I, I'm not sure it's actually true that we don't do musicals. Um, one of the things I've been talking about with Alan Paul—our Associate Director here at STC, and who's directing this production—is that, I think, the third season Michael Kahn was here as Artistic Director, we did “The Beggar's Opera—”

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm. Right.

LICHTENBERG: —in 1988, with Ed Gero, and, you know, in the 2010-11 Season, the year before I started, Mary Zimmerman's production of Bernstein's adaptation of “Candide—”

ANDERSON: That was—

LICHTENBERG: —was a musical.

ANDERSON: That was co-presented, right, with, uh—

LICHTENBERG: —with the Goodman Theatre—

ANDERSON: —with the Goodman, yes—

LICHTENBERG: —from Chicago. And, you know, that was the first, I, I call—“Beggar's Opera” is the first dabbling in musical, the musical form. “Candide” is the first, kind of, grownup musical that we've done—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —at Shakespeare Theatre. It was the first one that was in the Harman—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and it was the first time, I think, that everyone realized, “Oh, the Harman is a perfect space to be doing these operas, musicals, operatic kind of drama.” It has a, you know, it can accommodate an orchestra pit, we can get talent from New York, from around the country, as well as talent here in Washington, we have, uh, a perfect musical production apparatus—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —that led not so indirectly to the next season, my first season here, the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season, doing these two-week, encore-style stagings of musicals: “The Boys from Syracuse,” “Two Gentlemen of Verona.” So really, this has been a thing that’s been building and building, and here we are.

ANDERSON: And here we are with, kind of, our first real, big, official “Yes, we’re going to do musicals, and not just, like, co-present a ‘Candide’ or something along those lines,” yeah?

LICHTENBERG: It’s both a departure for Shakespeare Theatre and also something that is part of a tradition that’s been developing, percolating, and—

ANDERSON: —something peculiar and something familiar.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, exactly. Is that a line—

ANDERSON: That’s a, that’s a line from the—

LICHTENBERG: How dare you!

ANDERSON: Yeah, oh, I went there, oh I went there. It was, it was gonna come up eventually.

LICHTENBERG: Ugh, see, I’m, like, the least musical theatre quoting-type person ever, so, like, it’s great that you’re here.

ANDERSON: Well, it doesn’t, I don’t, I don’t even think, it’s just, I’m a quoting person in general. It doesn’t necessarily mean I’m a musical theater person, but yeah—

LICHTENBERG: The other thing I want to mention, Garrett, is that the amount of music and songs in Shakespeare and in productions, like, “Measure for Measure”—

ANDERSON: Yeah, the one that just closed.

LICHTENBERG: —Uh, “Much Ado About Nothing,” that we, which we did as a Free for All, “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” You know, the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” we did last Christmas was basically the “Les Misérables” of all “Midsummer Night’s Dreams.”

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: It had so much music in it—

ANDERSON: Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: —it was insane, the amount of orchestration—

ANDERSON: —Well—

LICHTENBERG: —that was in the show.

ANDERSON: —and the “Measure for Measure,” I mean, I know a lot of the people in the cast and crew would joke that their pre-show was, essentially, a four-song German musical.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, we built, uh, original musical from scratch with the kind of talent that the Shakespeare Theatre draws regularly—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —composing talent, singing and dancing talent, and, you know, Michael Kahn’s also said again and again that performing Shakespeare for American actor’s the best training for it is to be a musical theater actor—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —that it demands a similar technique. And the other thing is, you know, we had our Meet the Cast for this show during the shutdown, the government shutdown—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and, uh, one of the things Alan Paul said was that this town needs comedy.

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: This town, it needs comedy tonight, we need something to make people—to take people’s minds off of the horrible gridlock that characterizes Washington today.

ANDERSON: Absolutely. Yeah, and, I think, to digress a little bit about the musical factor of this, and to talk more—you started to say it’s a low comedy, and it is, in fact, based upon, uh, the, the plays and writings of Plautus a Roman, uh, uh, comic, a Roman comic writer from way, way, way back in the day, so, so it is, in fact, a more of a classical type of play that we’re producing here.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, in fact, if you’re gonna do a musical, this is the perfect one to be doing at a classical theatre because even though it’s a, it’s a Broadway, low comedy, it has the most high-minded, and the most pedigreed of origin stories. Uh, it was Burt Shevelove’s passion since he was an undergraduate at Brown—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and then, um, getting his Masters in Drama at Yale in the 1930's and '40s, to adapt a musical out of the plays of Plautus. He, uh, wrote the lyrics for a musical called, "Plautus Potpourri" or "A Couple of Greeks on a Roman Holiday" —

ANDERSON: Yup.

LICHTENBERG: —and then we wrote another one for a musical called, "When in Rome," and uh, the, the three plays that he adapted for those two musicals, one was "Mostellaria" by Plautus, or "The Haunted House," and there's a haunted house in "Forum" —

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and the other two were "Pseudolus," the story of a clever house slave who wins his freedom and "Miles Gloriosus," the story of a swaggering warrior—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —all of whom appear in "Forum," so, in a certain sense, "Forum," is his project that had started 30 or 40 years earlier—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —at an Ivy-league school as an experiment, infusing classical drama with popular contemporary musical theater—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and it's kind of, you know, Plautus' plays are hard to do because a lot of them are really short, a lot of, we—for some of them, we don't have the endings, we have fragments—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —of them. The only way to do Plautus is to do "a greatest hits" of Plautus, which is what "Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" is.

ANDERSON: Absolutely, and, and, you know, "Forum," like you, we had talked about previously, it, it has of the unities, all they're still in unities, you need time, space and, um, action.

LICHTENBERG: —It has a unit set—

ANDERSON: Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: —which is very unusual for Broadway in the '50's.

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —right, this is the era of Oscar Hammerstein and “South Pacific” —

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm, all of these dream ballets—

LICHTENBERG: —dream, yeah—

ANDERSON: —all of these high-minded types of, of work on Broadway, which is what got them started on this play, is that Sondheim and, and, and Shevelove and Gelbart were, were at a party—

LICHTENBERG: —they were at a dinner party—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and Sondheim and Shevelove went to Yale together—

ANDERSON: Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: —and they were complaining about how pretentious Broadway was—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and how we needed to go back to the basics—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —go back to the classics—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and actually teach people something new, teach people something new, which is, in fact, was ancient—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —‘cause you could ask yourself, “Who’s Plautus? What’s the importance of Plautus?” Well, Plautus wrote “The Menaechmi Twins,” which is the source material for “The Comedy of Errors” by Shakespeare—

ANDERSON: Uh huh.

LICHTENBERG: —He wrote a play called, “The Little Gold Sack,” which is the inspiration for “The Miser” by Molière. Plautus is the father of all comedy, or all domestic comedy going through Shakespeare, through Molière, through Commedia dell’arte, to—

SMITH: Yeah, I was about to say, all these plots that you’re throwing out, it sounds a lot like “The Servant of Two Masters” that we did just a couple of years ago—

LICHTENBERG: —yeah, I mean, there’s a stock—

SMITH: —the servant winning his freedom, and—

LICHTENBERG: —there’s a stock character, in, uh, “Servant of Two—” uh, in Commedia dell’arte, called Il Capitano, which is really nothing more than a Renaissance version of the Miles Gloriosus—

ANDERSON: Oh.

LICHTENBERG: —um, or the, the swaggering warrior, Sergius from Shaw’s “Arms and the Man,” all the way up to “Seinfeld” and “Friends,” you know, you have variations on Psedo—uh, on Plautine dramaturgy.

ANDERSON: Right, and so all, on and on, and like you said, all of that is present in “Forum,” in a way, you could also argue that Sondheim, even though he’s very, very much still “working day” and very, very popular, is, I mean, you could consider Sondheim almost classic, almost, almost, almost God-like in the theatre, in the world of theatre—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah think of, uh, the most important 20<sup>th</sup> Century American theatre artists. You’ve have to say Eugene O’Neill—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —uh, Tennessee Williams. But in the musical theater form, Sondheim is up there with Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers. He, you know, in some ways, he, he kind of towers above them—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —in my personal opinion. I’m not an expert in musical theater at all, but—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —Sondheim is certainly a classic.

ANDERSON: Absolutely, and, and so, in those, in those, regards, we’re really not straying that much from, from the Shakespeare Theatre’s mission, and a lot of, and a lot of the people during

Meet the Cast were saying, you know, “Why, why, why musical, why now,” and those questions seem to answer that very well.

LICHTENBERG: Or those answers seem to answer that question very well? (laughs)

ANDERSON: Sure.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, I forgot to say at the beginning, we will be joined by the star of “Forum” and the star, last year, of “Midsummer Night’s Dream” —he played Bottom, he was a very funny Bottom—Bruce Dow, who is a beloved, already a beloved, local institution, even though this is his second show here at STC (laughs), so stay tuned.

(MUSIC)

LICHTENBERG: So, we're back with Bruce Dow—

BRUCE DOW: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: —our, as I said before, already a beloved local institution.

DOW: Oh, you guys are sweet. I love being here. I really love this Company and city is amazing. You have sky here.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

DOW: Very few cities have sky anymore.

LICHTENBERG: Now, Bruce, you are playing Pseudolus in “Forum,” and you come to us from, uh, the great White North—

DOW: Yes, I do.

LICHTENBERG: —right?

DOW: Well, I'm an American citizen I was born in Seattle, somewhat raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and I've been back and forth my whole life, so, I'm, I'm lucky. I get to play both sides of the border.

LICHTENBERG: A man without a country.

DOW: Yes, I'm homeless.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

DOW: I'm free and, like—

LICHTENBERG: So, tell us about rehearsal. What are you guys working on, like, right now in "Forum?"

DOW: Okay, we have finished—What's really nice about this is, um, we're treating it like a play, which it is. Um, I can, maybe, elaborate more on that later, but, um, we've sort of rough-staged Act I, and we're now taking a step into Act II. So, it's, um, what's great is we're not—I mean, we have a brilliant choreographer, Josh Rhodes, who's doing amazing stuff—but the show is not, we're not settling on anything, we're working, it's a process. So, uh, sometimes, with a musical, you, you get in a position of, you know, "This is how we're going to do it, that's how it is," and then you just practice, practice, practice. This is really playing with the script, and playing—mining the information that's in the material, 'cause there's tons of it. So, um, so, we've sort of roughed in a sketch for Act I that makes sense, and, now, it's very important with a farce to see that Act I pays off in Act II, so we're beginning to see where the dominos are falling and where they're not, and where we have to go back and place them in. Does that make any sense?

ANDERSON: That makes perfect sense.

LICHTENBERG: Well, yeah, I think, uh, Larry Gelbart said once, about the script, that you can't remove a single line of dialogue, literally—

DOW: You can't.

LICHTENBERG: —or a single character.

DOW: No, no. It is, it is perfectly structured. It is, it is a house of cards that is meant to tumble in a certain way, and it does every time. I was trying to explain it to somebody at, well, one of our, uh, audience event things. Um, uh, just like Oedipus or Oedipus Rex, however you want to pronounce his name, it's, from the moment he comes out on the steps and says, "Something's wrong with my city, I wanna fix it," it, inevitably, leads to his horrific downfall. This, as a farce, this is exactly the same kind of thing. It is as beautifully structured as that.

LICHTENBERG: It's class—you could say, it's classically structured—

DOW: It is class—it is completely classically structured because our comedy, Roman comedy, came from Greek comedy, the whole, um, Commedia dell'arte, post dark ages, came from the Roman comedy, and that's what we picked up, and that's what, uh, that's where these guys came from.

ANDERSON: Well, as, for as long as this, this show was in production, initially, just, like, writing up the script, they had, they had several, several years of just rewrites and rewrites and

rewrites, and I think Sondheim now calls it the tightest farce he has ever seen in the most, the, the absolute perfect way—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

DOW: —No, it totally is. If you look, if you look at the French boulevard farces, um, what's his name, it's—

LICHTENBERG: Feydeau.

DOW: Feydeau. Yeah. Uh, it's what you could see him aspiring to write, but it doesn't—it, it isn't this clean. This is—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

DOW: —and, and what's great also with this piece is that it can—it's funny from the beginning, sure, 'cause there's great lines and wacky characters and stuff, but it's when you get further into playing it, and the laughs are coming from payoff of plot points, and who—you know where people are and the other characters don't know, and you feel the audience going with it, which, this is just, it's so perfectly set up for that.

LICHTENBERG: Now, you, Bruce, are playing Pseudolus, right—

DOW: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: —who is the, kind of, the center of the play. Not to, not to brag or anything—

DOW: No, no, and it's, but it's, yeah, go ahead.

LICHTENBERG: He's the clever slave—

DOW: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —who, kind of, directs all the ensem—he's like the, Garrett was calling him the traffic cop.

ANDERSON: Traffic cop.

DOW: It's totally traffic cop. Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: How do you approach a role like Pseudolus?

DOW: Oh, well, again, it works really well from taking it from the script. As an actor, your character has to have an action, an overall intention. You're super objective. Pseudolus

wants to be free. He has an opportunity for that to happen. Every single thing he does, from the beginning of the play to the end of the play, is to get to that goal, and as obstacles are thrown in his way, he has to juggle them and balance them. But really, he is, in many ways, he's the straight man for the rest of the company. So, um, for me, it's to keep it active and to keep it simple and to keep it real, and that sounds crazy to a lot of people who know the play, but it's what I firmly believe a good actor in a comedy should do: Is to keep it truthful, keep it real, keep it based in something, and it's when you believe that the character has no choice but to hide in the closet or swing from the chandelier to escape the terror, that's when you go with it and you let it happen.

ANDERSON: And then I know, and I know the director, Alan Paul, has approached this in a very truthful way, and he's afraid, and he was afraid of all the people who had seen this before and seen really bad productions of cartoony qualities of people just, kind of, just doing it over the top and unrealistic, and, like, I agree, I think approaching it in a truthful way best way to be dealing it.

DOW: If you, if—we forget that if you go back and look at the great Vaudevillians and the great silent film stars, Laurel and Hardy, it's, even W.C. Fields, it's all based on a truthful, actually usually very painful situation. Now, we forget that and we think of the gag. You look at Charlie Chaplin. Everything has an incredibly strong, tragic undertone—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

DOW: —but, wow, he deals with it in his ingenuity, and overcoming the circumstances is what makes it fly and makes it hilarious. We've gotten to a, there's sort of a "yucky, yucky," you, you follow the outside actions, but you don't follow the core of the truth, and that, that happens a lot in all kinds of comedy and it happens a lot in a lot of musical theater, and I've seen it happen in a lot of Shakespeare comedies, too, where it's "Oh, this is the funny bit, where So-and-So does whatever, you know, Launce talks to his dog." Unless he's is really talking to the dog, and he's really upset about his family—this is "Two Gentleman of Verona" reference—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

DOW: —but, if, if—

LICHTENBERG: —which we did two seasons ago.

DOW: —which you did two seasons ago? Uh, unless he really is upset about what's going on, you're not invested in it, you're not invested in him, and it's not funny, I think, anyway, (silly voice) but that's my opinion.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

DOW: (silly voice) There you go. That's my two cents.

LICHTENBERG: What's that famous quote about comedy, the Mel Brooks one?

ANDERSON: Oh, um, um, um, tragedy is "I cut my finger," and comedy is "I've fallen into an open sewer and died."

DOW: (laughs) Yes. No, it is. It took—and, it, I mean, if you look at, like, "Midsummer Night's Dream" last year, most Shakespeare comedies start as a tragedy. It's, the war is over, Hippolyta is marrying Theseus, nobody's happy. The family is fighting, the children are fighting the parents, they're, you know, wrong people are going to be forced to love each other, and it becomes a comedy. This starts on a lighter tone, but the family is going away, the young boy is in love, his slave wants his freedom, how can we make this happen? And then, it actually goes through very horrible plays until—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

DOW: —but it's hilarious the way it goes there, um, and then it turns around and flips and becomes comedy. It's, uh, I never, I never—I had really great teachers at University and I, I, it's a strange thing for me to run into, in my career, where people, there's serious art, and there's not serious art, or there is lesser art, and there is greater art. I had a bunch of great teachers, who said, they sort of put into me the idea that the world of the play tells you how the play is communicated, and when you say "world of the play," it's the historical aesthetic background of the time, it's also how the piece is written, and what the authors are going for in their method of expression, and for me, what that gives me as an actor, but, as an actor, it's all from the same place. You start with truth, want, action, how are you doing it. Now, if it's a Shakespeare play, played by Shakespeare, a Shakespeare play—I'm real educated, ay—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

DOW: —um, Shakespeare play, it's, it's written in verse and prose for very specific reasons, you go with that. If it's a musical, your characters live in a world where they sing and dance to express their true, honest emotions, and, and it's a farce, it's where "I want my objective so badly that I'm willing to do the ludicrous and the dangerous and the insane to get it, so, um, I don't know where the point of this was—

LICHTENBERG: —Yeah, no. (laughs)—

DOW: —Uh, I don't know where the hell I was going with this one, but, just that it's, it's all the same thing for the actors

LICHTENBERG: Bruce, it seems like what you're saying is that "Forum" is as important or more important in content. How a play means is more important than what it means in some ways. Sorry, that's a very egg-headed—

DOW: No, that's beautiful, actually. Um, I think, is that, I wouldn't distinguish, in terms of the validity of it based on, I mean, you want a family drama, you go for "King Lear." You want a family comedy, you go for a Roman comedy—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

DOW: —and, you know, if you look at the difference between "I Love Lucy" and the early television of the '50's, it's very much Roman comedy. It's people of the street, um, Jackie, "The Jackie Gleason Show," the, uh—

LICHTENBERG: "The Honeymooners."

DOW: "The Honeymooners." That is Roman comedy. It's the man on the street, the first time the man on the street was portrayed, uh, and his story is as valid as King Lear's is, you know—

LICHTENBERG: —and you know, Shevelove—

DOW: —and the actor's approach is the same thing.

LICHTENBERG: Shevelove and Gelbart used to say they, this was the scenario for Vaudevillians. They were writing it for the Zero Mostels and the Phil Silvers of their day—

DOW: Well, and what they mean and what I'm, you know, not to brag on our side, what that means is, I think, 'cause they wrote a really sound, structural piece, from which there are moments that, that magic of their personal comedy would be allowed to grow, and I think we're finding things where, "Oh, in So-and-So's production, they did a bit here, or, in So-and-So's production, they did a bit there," and we're finding more, in my experience in Commedia stuff, it that, that the lazzi, the funny action, comes, at a moment when you've earned it, when such-and-such has happened, we know that's happened, we know this part of the plot, but now, we have a moment for X to happen, that does come out of the reality of the situation, but it can grow to that little, absurd thing.

LICHTENBERG: So, this heavy comic theory aside—

(LAUGHTER)

ANDERSON: Yes.

DOW: (cryptic voice) Yes. I hope you come and have lots of laughs at our very serious comedy.

LICHTENBERG: Come and stroke your chin—

DOW: Exactly. Come and stroke your chin.

LICHTENBERG: —and think about suffering.

DOW: Exactly. Bring some Nietzsche to read while you're—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. I actually taught Nietzsche yesterday—

DOW: Did you really?

LICHTENBERG: —at my class.

DOW: Voluntarily? Oh my God.

LICHTENBERG: (laughs) Man, existential nausea. It was wonderful.

DOW: Oh, it's fabulous stuff.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, what are you (laughs)—

DOW: (silly voice) Bring the kids.

LICHTENBERG: What are you, besides, besides Nietzsche and suffering—

DOW: Right!

LICHTENBERG: —what are you most looking forward to in staging “Forum,” in performing “Forum,” in rehearsing “Forum,” what, what about the process are you most excited about?

DOW: Uh, I, uh, working with this cast blows my mind. The resumes these people have, this is one of those ones where I feel, sort of feel that all the time, but more than ever, I feel, “What, they invited me to the party, and I get to play with these people?” Danny Rutigliano, who just came off doing, um, who plays our Marcus Lycus, just came off doing the revival of “Fiorello!” for City Center Encores!, our Miles Gloriosus did “Superman” for, uh, “It’s a Bird ... It’s a Plane, Superman” for Encores!, Steve, my names are—

ANDERSON: Vinovich

DOW: Vinovich, thank you, Vinovich, ‘cause there’s also Nick Verina, so I was going “Which, which is it? Purina or which is it?”

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

DOW: It's been a long day. Uh, no, Steve Vinovich has been on every TV program and in every movie, and he's just a brilliant actor, let alone a comic actor. No, the bunch we've got here is, yeah—

LICHTENBERG: So, of course, Tom Story is playing Hysterium—

DOW: Oh my God!

LICHTENBERG: —who has the most wonderful castrato singing voice—

DOW: (laughs) It was so sad the way that accident happened, um, but he's recovered from it so well. Those pills are a mighty a help. Um, uh, oh my God, I'm in love with Tom Story. No, and we get so many scenes together, and I just adore working with, it's, it's—playing with people who respect the material, and respect each other, and also are in a state of play—work and play, if you juggle the two, is the most exciting thing in the world. Yeah, so I love that, I, I love that we're doing a musical at a classical theatre company. I think that's immensely important, and I, I wanna to show them why, you know.

LICHTENBERG: Well, why do you think it, why do you think we're doing one?

DOW: Again, I never distinguish between form; it's the quality of the work, it's the quality of the writing. You want a farce? You will never get a better farce. If you don't like farce, I can't make you like farce. If you don't like tragedy or Shakespearean verse, I can't make you like it, but I can do it the best I can, and give you the option of going, maybe thinking about it in a different way. Yeah, I, I think—

LICHTENBERG: It's almost like by doing it, we're saying this is classical theatre.

DOW: It is classical theatre. I mean, there are so many lines in this piece that are straight out of the Plautus, you know, Plautus, Plautus, again, Oedipus, Oedipus—

LICHTENBERG: Plautus, Plautus—

DOW: —You say Plautus, I say Plautus.

LICHTENBERG: Well, Bruce, we'd like to thank you for coming. We're all so thrilled you're back in Washington. We can't wait to see your Pseudolean performance.

DOW: (laugh) Pseudolean performance. Um, I'm the lucky one to be here, so thank you guys so much.

LICHTENBERG: You're very sweet. Thank you.

DOW: Thank you.

(MUSIC)

LICHTENBERG: That was the inimitable Bruce Dow, Garrett.

ANDERSON: That it, that is—there are so many ways of describing him. I'm glad you chose that one. (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: The one and, the one and the only.

ANDERSON: The one and the only, most definitely.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, is there anything he said that you wanna respond to, or—

ANDERSON: Well, he was, he was talking a lot of about uh, the comedy coming from a certain place, for, like, the "Jackie Gleasons" the "I Love Lucys," and stuff like that, and I know that a lot of the dramaturges that we've been doing, is based upon a lot of the Henri Bergson essays on comedy, laughter, and the, the main point that Henri Bergson talks about is that comedy is all based out of something human, whether it's, you take a human and then you take their humanness away and make them a machine and make them go through repetition, or enlarge something of theirs, like, physically or emotionally, and that automatically makes comedy, or if you give that human instinct to something, like you get why "Wall-e" is funny because you have this robot who has human instincts, or you have dogs or animals and you dress them up as humans, like "Oh, that's immediately funny because, uh, there is a humanistic quality," and I thought it was interesting that he was talking a lot about those where that older comedy was coming from that, like, sense of tragedy, and it's true because it's a human, it's a human thing.

LICHTENBERG: He also said something interesting, which is that Pseudolus is the straight man—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —for all the other people who come on, and I never realized, but he's totally true. He's surrounded by all these supersized, sort of, archetypes—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —you know, the courtesans, there's a chorus of courtesans and a chorus of eunuchs—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —in this play. There's a huge, muscular soldier—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —uh, there are these two ridiculous lover characters—

ANDERSON: —the dumbstruck lovers, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and he's the one, kind of, man-sized person, the human-sized character—

ANDERSON: He is the, he is the, he is the, he is the zero point that everyone strays from.

LICHTENBERG: Right, he is the audience identifier—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and so, we see the world through his eyes—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and you know Bruce is also just a brilliant, gifted, very inventive, very funny—

ANDERSON: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: —natural comedian.

ANDERSON: Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, we saw that here obviously. (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: We actually just recorded him screaming—

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —in the show, and it was like, watching, um, it was like watching, uh, Laurel and Hardy. One other thing that we didn't mention, though, we talked a little bit about Sondheim before Bruce got here. Sondheim's relationship to this musical: It's a, it's kind of a complex one, actually.

ANDERSON: Absolutely, absolutely. I think he, it, it was one of, it was his first one on Broadway where he had done both lyrics and music for—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

ANDERSON: —which, obviously, is, like, a big deal, but it was also one of the first ones that he strayed from his, like, traditional Sondheim-y roots of doing—

LICHTENBERG: He had done the lyrics for "West Side Story"—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —right before he did this. He did, he then did the lyrics, I think, for “Gypsy”—

ANDERSON: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: —while he was working on “Forum”—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —but, this is the first musical for which he wrote the music and the lyrics—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and it’s a, you know, it’s interesting, because “Forum,” itself, was extremely successful. It won, swept the Tony Awards—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —except for the score. It did not even get a nomination for the score—

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and, you know, Sondheim has said in his wonderful book, “Finishing the Hat:” “‘Forum’ is a great farce. As a musical, it doesn’t work.”

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —that the songs interrupt the flow, actually, of the action too much. They get in the way—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —of the action. But I wonder, you know, I wonder if, given that we have more time now to look at this within the, within Sondheim’s total career, if he’s not, kind of, underrating it, if it’s not, sort of, as brilliant, or the start of his brilliance, in some ways.

ANDERSON: Well, I think it, it’s, it’s so different from the rest of his musicals. I think you, you get into stuff, like, “Into the Woods,” and you get into stuff—

LICHTENBERG: “Sweeney Todd”

ANDERSON: —like “Sweeney Todd” that are, that are, I mean, “Sweeney Todd’s” definitely dark, and “Into the Woods” definitely hits some dark moments and stuff, and, and really delving

into deep issues, and “Forum” is, is, just that: It's a farce, it's a low comedy, and a lot of the music is decoration, as opposed to advancement of plot, for the most part. I mean, you can argue about other, other songs, but because it's so different, maybe, I think, he's looking at it from that hindsight view, and be like, “Oh, that's such that different thing, that it, that's why it doesn't work as compared to all of my other Tony-winning musicals.” (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, anyways, we're very lucky to be doing it—

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: It's extremely exciting to be doing a material, material that is really legitimately part of the classic American canon.

ANDERSON: And it's just so much fun. It's such a fun show, especially, especially when it's done well, and this one's absolutely gonna be done well with Bruce and the cast and Alan; like, I'm very excited for it.

LICHTENBERG: Well, that brings us to, like, our, sort of, wrapping-up question:

SMITH: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, what is the, the one piece of culture that we associate with “Forum” that we want to recommend to our listeners?

ANDERSON: The piece of culture. I, I, I, this is a little bit I, I don't know if it's attainable, like people who are listening to this will know it, but, if nothing else, it's a nice piece of pop culture trivia. The song, the song, “Comedy Tonight,” was the third initial opening song, after rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. The initial one, “Invocation,” uh, was what was first originally started, was replaced because it wasn't hummable, according to the director at the time—

LICHTENBERG: —George Abbott.

ANDERSON: George Abbott.

LICHTENBERG: —The Great “Mr. Fix-It” of Broadway.

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, “Invocation” would later be used in “The Frogs”

ANDERSON: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —by Stephen Sondheim and Shevelove—

ANDERSON: Mmm hmm. And then, of course, “Comedy,” in the—

LICHTENBERG: —which, sorry—

ANDERSON: —No, you’re—

LICHTENBERG: —trivia—had its premiere in Yale swimming pool in 1972.

ANDERSON: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: It was performed in a swimming pool.

ANDERSON: Huh.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Um, and then, so, “Comedy Tonight” was the, was the third and the last one. It was hummable, it was funny, and it set up the whole play, and, um. But the second one, after “Invocation,” before “Comedy Tonight,” was called “Love is in the Air,” and, I hadn’t known this until I started doing dramaturgy on this play and research on this play, is that it’s used in the Robin Williams and Nathan Lane “Birdcage,” the movie. There’s a scene between Robin Williams and Christine Baranski, I think, is her name, and they sing “Love is in the Air” when they have that, that moment together, and they’re reminiscing about a show that they were in as actors together, and that’s the song, and I had no idea, and now I’m able to make that connection, and I’m hoping people out here will be able to make that connection as well.

LICHTENBERG: And actually, it never appears in, uh, the lyrics to “Love is in the Air” never appear in the play, only appear as underscore—

ANDERSON: —in the beginning of the second Act—

LICHTENBERG: —beginning of Act II.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So that’s a nice little piece of pop culture, I guess, for, for people who were in love with “The Birdcage,” like I am. (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: My piece of trivia is not the movie starring Zero Mostel, which is actually worth seeing—it’s a really interesting, kind of, historical document of imagining the way it was originally staged on Broadway—

ANDERSON: Absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: But, another weird trivia factoid about “Forum” is that it was not written for Zero Mostel; it was written for Phil Silvers, who was the kind of, uh, fast talking, bespectacled

comedian, famous on TV for playing Sergeant Bilko. So, I would recommend people get the DVDs or rent the movies, the TV shows of Phil Silvers', who was just, we, you know, we forget how amazing some of these comedians really were—

ANDERSON: —Oh, absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: —in their day and age.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, I'll have to ask Hannah what hers is next time, and, until next time,

(MUSIC)

LICHTENBERG: This is Drew,

SMITH: —this is Andy,

ANDERSON: —and this is Garrett,

LICHTENBERG: —signing off and thanking you for tuning in.

SMITH: You've been listening to the Shakespeare Theater Company's Prosecast, Episode number thirteen, with Drew Lichtenberg, Garrett Anderson, Andy Smith, and, special guest, Bruce Dow. You can find additional episodes and subscribe to podcast by searching iTunes for Shakespeare Theater Company Asides or visit the Asides webpage at [shakespearetheatre.org](http://shakespearetheatre.org). Tickets can be purchased by calling our Box Office at (202) 547-1122, or simply visit [shakespearetheatre.org](http://shakespearetheatre.org).

DOW: (screaming)