



Peter Filichia: Theater Appraiser

MADDIE ORTON (00:02):

Hi, I'm Maddie Orton, and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast.

You may know Peter Filichia from his 19 years as The Star Ledger's theater critic, or as a columnist for Masterworks Broadway, author of several books, Broadway Radio personality, or playwright.

Filichia has worked in and around the theater for decades. He's seen shows in 47 states and 20 foreign countries—he keeps a list. And after nearly 30 years of hosting the Theatre World Awards, he will be honored with their 2024 TWA Special Award.

I spoke with Peter about theater criticism, how he fell in love with the art form, some of his favorite New Jersey theater experiences, and why he views himself as a theatrical matchmaker for audiences. Take a listen.

So Peter, thank you so much for joining me, and congratulations on your upcoming award. Very well deserved.

PETER FILICHIA (01:01):

Well, as Nathan Lane said a few years ago when we gave him a lifetime achievement award, 'I wonder if my doctors are keeping something from me,' because you get these things when you reach a certain age, but it is a consolation because we have to get older. There's nowhere to go but up.

MADDIE ORTON (01:18):

Yeah, get a nice award out of it. That's fantastic. And you've been working in the industry since 1968 in various capacities as a theater critic, as a playwright, as a writer, as a personality, how did you get started in the industry originally?

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PETER FILICHIA (01:37):

It was really ironic. I went to a very strange high school. It was brand new, so they only had freshmen. The second year they only had sophomores and freshmen. It took four years to fill the school. But here's my point. I was the star of every show for four years.

MADDIE ORTON

Oh, that's the dream.

PETER FILICHIA

"Where if I was in a regular high school, I would indeed be in small roles until my senior year, which by the way, as a result, when I went to college and they wanted to put me in the chorus, 'Are you crazy? Do you know who I am? I mean, I'm a star!' Somebody should have done a study on our school because it would've been very interesting. The quarterback for four years suddenly was on the bench. The head of the cheerleading squad suddenly wasn't even chosen. It's a very interesting situation, but here's my point.

PETER FILICHIA (02:19):

I became very well known for being the one person in school who was crazy for theater. I used to see most every show that came to town if I had the money. And so one day when I was in college, I was going up a flight of stairs and coming down a flight of stairs with somebody I knew from high school, Dennis Mahoney, who said to me, 'Hey, I've just become editor of the school paper. Why don't you be our theater critic?' I had never given thought. I said, 'Dennis, I do go as much as I can, but I don't think I can afford it.' And he says, 'But I think they give you free tickets.' I said, 'Sign me up.' So as a result, I started writing for the school paper, and then what had happened around the same time is there was a newspaper called Boston After Dark that was starting. It was essentially The Village Voice of Boston, an alternative. And I went there and I applied and they took me in, and so I started writing there. It eventually went out of business, and that was that. But off and on for the past many, many years I've been doing it and certainly enjoyed doing it.

MADDIE ORTON (03:18):

That's fantastic. I guess if you become a theater critic, there's something that really drew you to theater originally. I know for a lot of people that is acting. Did you love acting? Do you feel like in another time and place, that's the thing that you would've wanted to do?

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PETER FILICHIA (03:32):

Frankly, I'm a terrible actor, and I learned that a few years ago when a theater company in New Jersey said, 'Hey, we're doing Into the Woods. It's only going to be a reading, and we'd love you to be the narrator who also doubles as the mysterious man.'

MADDIE ORTON:

I love that.

PETER FILICHIA:

It's only a reading, and I thought, all right, so we'll rehearse Wednesday and Thursday. We'll do it Friday and Saturday and Sunday. We had to rehearse for a month, and I am telling you in any part where I had to act, it was like I was trying to chase a butterfly. I couldn't reach, I couldn't do it. I can't be anybody else. As the famous song from the Broadway musical, Golden Rainbow says, 'I've got to be Me.' So I'm okay when it comes to MCing, but as an actor, nope, just can't get into somebody else's shoes.

[MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (04:21):

You developed a one-man show, which I think is such a fabulous concept. Tell me a little bit about that and then how it dovetails with your career in theater criticism.

PETER FILICHIA (04:31):

Sure. What happened was years ago, I saw in The Village Voice that Spalding Gray was doing a one man show called The Personal History of the American Theater. What he was doing was sitting at a table with a whole bunch of index cards. He pulled them out at random on each one was the name of a show that he had directed, produced, written, been in whatever, seen, and he told a story, and I thought it was a terrific evening. Years later, I got to know him. I said, 'Hey, when are you going to do that show again?' He said, 'Yeah, yeah, I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it.' And then he died. And so I do it in his honor. I do the same thing. I sit to the table, I pull cards here, there and everywhere.

MADDIE ORTON (05:10):

So what were some of the stories that you've told related to New Jersey and New Jersey theaters?

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PETER FILICHIA (05:17):

Well, okay, I went to Teaneck, New Jersey where they had a theater there, and I saw a review that didn't do anything for me at all, but you know something? The audience loved it. The next day I wrote a review saying the audience threw their heads back in laughter so much today, they're all going to have to be fitted with whiplash collars. They really loved it. So the guy who runs the theater calls me up and says, 'You didn't like it, did you?' And I said, 'No, I didn't,' because it didn't speak to me. It was all about single people. By that point, this was 1994, I had been with the same woman for 16 years. This was all about people going to singles bars, making fools of themselves, having trouble with romance. I wasn't having trouble with romance. I couldn't relate to it, but the audience could, and that's what's important to me as a reviewer. I don't care if I like a show or not. That's not why I'm there. I'm not there to be entertained. I'm there to say, 'Okay, who would like this show?' I want to be a theatrical matchmaker. I want to get the show, I want to get the audience, bring them together, and I want everybody to have a good time.

[MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (06:29):

I'd love to give a shout out to specific theater companies in New Jersey that gave some of your most memorable experiences. Were there any shows that you really loved that, when you think of certain theaters, you think, 'Oh my God, that show!'

PETER FILICHIA (06:44):

Brian B. Crowe, that's Crowe with an 'e', just took over The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, and I predict a long and fruitful reign for this young man. When the millennium happened in 2000, I was asked to pick the people in the next century who were going to be significant, and Brian Crowe was my first choice because he has such imagination in the way he directs. I don't know if you're familiar with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but there's a character in it named Ariel, and he's supposedly a very strange spirit. Okay, fine. Usually he's played in a very airy type of way, very ethereal. What Brian did was totally encase an actor in a rubber suit. I don't--"suit" is much too grandiose a word. It's almost like he was simply covered in rubber. And what was interesting is Brian had him hold a skull, and he would occasionally pull the skull back and forth, and he would put it in various places.

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PETER FILICHIA (07:47):

So as a result, this guy was really very strange! And Ariel's supposed to be strange, but I've never seen him stranger when the face was here, there and everywhere. So it really was an ethereal being like none we'd ever seen before. Now Brian just took over and I really predict a terrific reign for him, and I look forward to going to Madison, New Jersey and seeing him. Now I am really looking forward partly to his opening show, A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder, because the leading man was the leading man in a play that I had produced five years ago off-Broadway, Christopher Sutton, who's a terrific talent, and I'm very glad he got the role. And I am counting the days like a kid till Christmas that I can go see him in the show.

[MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (08:37):

You've also started writing plays yourself. How many plays have you written so far?

PETER FILICHIA (08:42):

Well, I was a high school teacher for a lot of years, and as a result, I used to write plays for the kids, and one of them actually wound up winning a championship in New England back in 197 I guess it was. So it really happened because we had been doing plays for this competition that happens every year, and we weren't winning. And because so many people were saying, 'Well, the last time we saw that's section from Our Town, it was better than this one.' So I said to our director, 'Maybe we should write our own plays. Nobody will compare them to anything.' And so they say, necessity is the mother of invention, and that really has to do with this here. So that's what really happened. I really don't write unless I'm commissioned to do so. It's pretty rare. I do enter contests. Those are fun. So I've won contests in Madison, Wisconsin and San Juan Capistrano for various plays here and there, but pretty much on my own, I don't do it. I do have ideas for books, and I've written nine books about theater, and there'll be another one coming out in the fall, and I have an idea for another one. We'll see if that one sells. No idea if it will, but we'll see what happens.

MADDIE ORTON (10:08):

Having been on the other side as a theater critic, how do you feel writing plays? Are you, I don't know, self-conscious at all or aware of the fact that other people are going to be criticizing?

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PETER FILICHIA (10:19):

The statement I always say is, 'If there's one thing I cannot stand, it's a critic who cannot be criticized.' So as a result, it's fair game. I can dish it out, I can take it. You have to. It's very good to see how the other half lives. When I moved to New York from Boston in 1977, I soon got a job with a theater press agent who was handling such shows as *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* and *Death Trap*. And the thing was, I would call up critics and feature writers at newspapers saying, 'Please, oh, please do a story on us.' And the thing is, once I became a critic and press agents were calling me and saying, 'Oh, please, please do a story on us.' I would say, 'How can I help?' Because I'd been on the other side. I think it's really good that everybody does everybody's job, because if everybody does everybody's job, we'll have far more empathy for what goes on.

MADDIE ORTON (11:19):

That's true. And I think it probably makes you a better theater critic and a better writer overall having been on the other side...

PETER FILICHIA (11:25):

I've got to take issue, I always do, with the word 'critic.' Such a negative word. If you have a diamond and you bring it to 47th Street in New York where all the jewelers are, and you say, 'Is this good or bad?' The person who tells you it's good or bad, it's called an appraiser. Now, why is he an appraiser? And I'm a critic, I'd rather be an appraiser.

MADDIE ORTON (11:49):

Are you suggesting we rebrand this?

PETER FILICHIA (11:51):

It even has the word "praise" in it. So that's what I like. So really, it is such a negative word.

MADDIE ORTON (11:58):

So should we call you: "Peter Filichia, Theater Appraiser"?

PETER FILICHIA (12:01):

That sounds good. Yeah, I like that. Yeah,

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MADDIE ORTON (12:03):

I like that too. This is a nice rebranding. So you've written plays, you've written books, you also host a radio show, and you write a weekly column. Tell me about that.

PETER FILICHIA (12:13):

Well, I'm not the host. I'm a hired hand, but nevertheless, I'm on Broadway Radio most every Sunday. And we comment on what happened during the week, whether it be a show that opened, a show that closed, this week, of course, on Sunday, we'll be talking about the nominations that came out for both the Drama Desk (on which I'm a nominator), and the Tonys as well. So we'll talk about that and talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly of those nominations. And I've been doing it for 15 years. And the funny thing is, early in the game, the host said to me, 'Why don't you give a trivia question at the end of every broadcast and see if our listeners can get it?' So because I've been doing it for 15 years, they all added up, and I put them in a book called Brain Teasers for Broadway Geniuses, and it came out from Applause Books last September.

PETER FILICHIA (13:06):

Here's the funny thing, they're murderously hard questions. And one time I put in a question without putting in the answer, and when I looked at the question later, I had no idea what the answer was. So I wrote to Tony Janicki in Morton Grove, Illinois, who is the champion of all these. And I said, 'Listen, I've been thinking of asking this question. Do you think it's too hard?' 14 seconds later, he came back, 'No, it's not too hard. It's obvious. Here's has the answer.' I said, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That is the answer, isn't it?' But I didn't know. So yeah, so that book came out in September.

MADDIE ORTON (13:45):

I love that. Can you hit me with one of these Broadway Genius questions?

PETER FILICHIA (13:48):

Sure, sure. Let me give you the one that I couldn't figure out. Let's see if you can figure it out.

MADDIE ORTON (13:55):

I consider myself a Broadway genius.

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PETER FILICHIA (13:58):

She was in a musical, and she was engaged to a gentleman whose character's last name sounded, it was not spelled, sounded the same as the last name of a character that she would play 12 years later.

MADDIE ORTON (14:19):

Oh my God. What? I need a paper and pen for that.

PETER FILICHIA (14:21):

Yeah, ready? I think in 1934 was in Anything Goes when she was engaged her character to Evelyn in Oakley. And 12 years later she was Annie Oakley in Annie Get Your Gun. Not spelled the same, but sounds the same. So they're all that murderously hard. This is a book that you read for about seven minutes, and then you throw it against the wall. So you might have to give you a wall a paint job.

MADDIE ORTON (14:50):

Out of frustration? That sounds great.

PETER FILICHIA (14:53):

And this September we'll see A Showtune for Today, which is a song for every day of the year. As it says, '366 songs to brighten your year.' All optimistic songs. That's what we need. We need optimism. And show music is often optimistic. Yeah, you can talk about Sweeney Todd, sure. But nevertheless, "Put on a Happy Face," "Happy Talk," "You Gotta Have Heart," "Tomorrow." All these songs. So songs like that. So you wake up in the morning, you play the song, you'll feel better about yourself and the day to come.

[MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (15:32):

A lot of theater reviews and news coverage has taken quite a hit in the last several years. Where do you see all of that going?

PETER FILICHIA (15:41):

It hasn't been good for people, for me in my profession, but I truly believe that all these, and I mean this lovingly--the word 'amateur' means 'lover of'--that the amateur critics who are around really speak for the people, and I think they're really saying what the average person wants to see. So as a result, I think it's very healthy. The problem with all of us is that we see everything. And as a result of seeing

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everything, so many times we say, 'Ah, that's been done before.' But to people who haven't seen everything, it hasn't been done before. So as a result, we have a tendency to be critical of things that wouldn't occur to other people. The average person, the Broadway League claims that a heavy theater goer—heavy—goes four times a year. Well, all right, really, seriously. I mean, this one year I went 408 times. Now it wasn't even a leap year.

MADDIE ORTON (16:41):

There are 365 days in the year, Peter. How many times are you doing double days here?!

PETER FILICHIA (16:44):

The thing is here, I'm at a, and to be frank, often producers call me into workshops and say, 'Give us your opinion.' So that's been known to happen too. And that year was a particularly busy year. So I do keep track of these things. I really do. I have since I was a kid, and I've never stopped. So that's how I know that it was 408.

So yeah, when I was at The Star Ledger for a year, our dance critic, a lovely lady named Valerie Sudol, came up to me and said, 'You've been here a year. You could go on vacation.' I said, 'Yep, I'm going next week.' She said, 'Where you going?' And with the Caribbean in Europe in her voice. I said, 'Louisville.' 'Louisville. Oh, wait, wait. I get it. Friends, relatives, a wedding.' I said, 'No, no. I'm very embarrassed that I've never been to Actors Theater of Louisville. It's supposedly really quite a place, and it's only an hour from Cincinnati. And the thing is, there's a play there that a lot of people think are going to win a Pulitzer Prize. So I want to see it. And funny thing, Carol Channing's going to be there doing Hello Dolly, so why not?' She said, 'Wait, wait, wait, wait. You mean on vacation, you are going to do the same thing you do every other day of the year.' And I said, 'Well, then, Valerie, I must be in the right job because how many people would do what they do every other day of the year on their week's vacation?' I'm not interested in going on any vacation if I can't see a show. I've seen theater in 47 states and 20 foreign countries, and I certainly intend to keep going.

[MUSIC]

MADDIE ORTON (18:17):

Peter Filichia will be honored by the Theater World Awards on Monday, June 10th. He can be found as a regular contributor on Broadway Radio, columnist on MasterworksBroadway.com, and maybe even

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sitting nearby in the audience of your local theater.

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