



The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey Welcomes New Artistic Director

Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (00:03):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez and you're listening to The Jersey Arts Podcast. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is New Jersey's largest professional theatre company dedicated solely to Shakespeare's canon and other classic masterworks. Previously under the leadership of artistic director Bonnie J. Monte since 1990, the theater has since welcomed Brian Crowe as the new Artistic Director as of January of 2024.

Brian has been with the organization for 29 years, formerly serving as the Director of Education and a Resident Director. He holds BFAs in Directing and Acting from Wright State University and was a Fellow at the 2000 International Salzburg Shakespeare Seminar. Also having served on the Executive Committee of the Shakespeare Theatre Association. Crowe may have big shoes to fill but he's ready for the task.

During his tenure with STNJ, he has directed 27 plays in Shakespeare's canon in over 60 productions, as well as numerous other plays. The Star-Ledger has even called Mr. Crowe "one of the state's most ingenious directors."

In today's episode, I speak with Brian about his vision for the theater as he takes on this new role and the exciting lineup they have scheduled for this season. Be sure to mark your calendars.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:17):

I'm going to start with a congratulations because this is your first year as the Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey. So, how's it going?

BRIAN CROWE (01:24):

Thank you very much. It's going well. I'm very excited. I'm in a particularly unique situation, in the fact that I've been with a company for quite some time. This is the start of my 29th season, and so having a chance to know the institution inside is an advantage a lot of new Artistic Directors don't have. A lot of times, you're coming in completely blind. So, that's been a joy to continue to work with the staff and artists who have been friends and colleagues for so many years and to kind of continue on that growth as well as bringing new people in. So that's been great, but I always say everything's moving faster and slower than I thought it would, and it's no matter what you think you're about to go into, it's like marriage. You walk into a marriage, you're like, I know what this relationship is, and you get married and you're like, oh, this is something new and exciting. So, there's some very fun discoveries that are happening along the way too, but it's going great. Thank you for asking.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:19):

No, of course. And I love that parallel. I'm not married so I can't really compare, but I was going to say life is kind of like that fast and slow all at once and long and short all at once. But 29 years, I mean, what a feat in and of itself. In an era where loyalty among employees is not really prevalent, it's a feat in and of itself to say that you've been with one company for 29 years, so another double congratulations on that front. But I would love to ask you, what changes do you hope to make as you move forward, and what is it that returning audiences will notice in the difference between your new tenure as Artistic Director?

BRIAN CROWE (03:01):

Yeah, so I think I have two major goals this year. One is to uphold the legacy of high artistry, of the high caliber work we do on the stage that Bonnie, my predecessor, Bonnie J. Monte, who is now the Artistic Director Emerita, has built over her 34-year tenure with the company. So, holding onto that level of excellence in the work we do, the challenging work we do, the fun, exciting work we do. That's one, I want to hold onto that. As far as new things, they're really expansions on things, many things that were in the works or that because of Covid and many other challenges had fallen by the wayside. So, engaging new audiences. I think one of the greatest challenges that every classic theater has, and frankly theater

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has right now, but classic theaters especially, is that it feels like a kind of niche market, and it really isn't. Shakespeare specifically, and the other classics are for everybody.

BRIAN CROWE (03:55):

And one of the things I'm most excited about is getting a lot of new people into our theater that may, especially people who think that, oh, well, Shakespeare's not for me, I didn't like it in high school. Well, trust me, I had a bad experience in high school myself. It was not a great experience, my first introduction to Shakespeare. But getting into it and seeing these amazing artists, we get to bring in both on stage and behind the scenes, creating this beautiful work that is very relevant and present today. We never do museum pieces. It's not like going and seeing a piece of painting on the wall, nothing wrong with that, but on stage you want that kind of live and active in the moment and it feels very relevant and timely right now. So, getting new people into our audiences, into the theater is a major goal for us this year.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:35):

It's funny how many people I hear who do love Shakespeare now say that they had a horrible experience with it when they were first introduced to it. And I'm one of those people. I hated Shakespeare in high school because it felt like a foreign language and sometimes it still does. I absolutely love seeing it on stage though, because it makes a difference to see it live. I mean, it wasn't meant to be read. Right? So, context helps a lot when you can see actors performing on a stage. I mean, what was the first moment that that shift happened for you, where you went from, okay, I did not like Shakespeare to, oh my gosh, this guy's awesome.

BRIAN CROWE (05:14):

Yeah, I can tell you exactly. My first experience with Shakespeare was in school, and the first teacher who taught me Shakespeare was Romeo- We were doing "Romeo and Juliet," and the teacher loved language, was a fantastic English teacher, was not super fond of Shakespeare in my mind, and it was just go home, read these pages, come back. I didn't understand half of it. As you said, it sometimes can feel like a foreign language though. It actually is modern English, it's early modern English. It's the same words we speak today most of the time. But the following year we were doing "Macbeth" and it was a different teacher, Ms. Kalman, and she was amazing. We got up on our feet, we were reading, we were conjuring in the classroom, we were doing pretend sword fights with our pencils, and suddenly I was like, oh, this is what Shakespeare is. It's up, it's active, it's alive, it's present. And once that turn

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happened, I never looked back. It was something that was super exciting, something that then I got excited about sharing with other people and finding ways and how to bring that out not only to my fellow classmates at the time, but also I did my first Shakespeare tour when I was in college that I created with classmates there. So, it was something kind of fun and engaging. We wanted to get out to the community with

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (06:27):

That's wonderful. And it speaks to the difference that an invested teacher can make when your teacher shows passion for something, then hopefully that - I don't speak English anymore and I can't figure out the word that I'm trying to say that transpires or it moves on to their students. And you guys are doing "Macbeth?"

BRIAN CROWE (06:48):

We are this year, yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (06:50):

That's wonderful.

BRIAN CROWE (06:51):

First time in 20 years, oddly enough. It's one of the big classics and we have not done it in 20 years, so I'm very excited to bring it back.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (06:57):

Wow, 20 years. And speaking of a long time since you've done things, you are also doing "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," which you are directing, and that's a musical which you haven't done or that the theater hasn't done in 12 years. So how did that happen? Why the turnaround? Why musical theater?

BRIAN CROWE (07:15):

Well, and I do want to say we're not going to become a musical theater theatre, but there are some musicals that are great and exciting, and I think there's something about the dynamic of creating a world in which music springs to life out of people and the excitement that's kind of raised, elevated moment we're living, in the same way that Shakespeare goes into heightened verse when we feel those things. It

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is actually a very close connection. I've always been a huge fan of musical theater. It's something that I've always wanted to do. Not only have we not done it in 12 years, it's the first musical I'm actually ever directing, so that's very exciting as far as that goes. I've been in many in the years past, but it's exciting to be on this end of things. But it was a decision to, I mentioned earlier that one of the things we're trying to do this year is get new audiences into the theater and get new people into the work that we do.

BRIAN CROWE (08:05):

We've never just done Shakespeare. That's never been who we are. Shakespeare always is the guy we stand behind. He's the guy who pays the bills as it were. But it is something only a major part, but not the only thing that we do at the theater. So, bringing a musical in, we've done it in the past. It's not a completely unknown thing, but something that I'm excited to bring new audiences in and we wanted to do it early so they'd see the great work we do here and how convenient it's to get here. You don't have to go through the bridge and tunnel to get to New York City. It's right in your backyard for New Jersey audiences, and it's a beautiful facility that F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre to play in and to see a show, and I just love it there. And so, we want to get them in early so that they say, wow, this is a great thing. I love this theater. Maybe I've never been here before. Let's see what else they have later in the season. And then we get 'em into some Shakespeare and stuff that's going on there.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:54):

I like that plan, especially as a musical theater fan myself, I have no musical talent, so I'm always jealous of the actors who can do that. And I am pivoting all over the place because I know that you guys have a wonderful lineup this season, the 2024 season, you've got "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," you've got "The Book of Will," Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility," "Macbeth," like we said before, and Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," timely of course for Christmas. There's so much to talk about and so little time. So, let's see what we can squeeze in here. I wanted to talk to you about something that was brought up and I don't have enough information on it, so I'd love to hear more about the Storefront to Stage Program. Am I getting that correct?

BRIAN CROWE (09:35):

You are. It's a new program that is being implemented this year. And again, I said a lot of things we're doing this year are things that we have done in different scales in the past or because of Covid, things fell off the wayside and we're just giving a little bit more direct focus to them. I think any theater in any

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community needs to be a part of that community and engage in that community in a very particular way. It can't just be we sit here, we do our great plays, why aren't you coming here? We are a member of the Madison Morristown, New Jersey Theater community. In fact, the National Theater Community as well. And so we're trying to find ways to directly engage and invite members of our community to work with us and to see what we have to offer and vice versa. So, Storefront to Stage is a new program this year that is inviting Madison, Morristown business owners into our theater for a special kind of night out of, they can relax, they can network, and they get to be entertained.

BRIAN CROWE (10:31):

We offer for this first round, it's an introductory thing. We'll offer some free tickets for them to come in. They'll get a chance to network with others at our lounge. They'll get a chance to network with other businesses in the area as well as the Shakespeare Theatre staff. They can find out what opportunities there are as far as sponsorship opportunities, partnership opportunities. We have a great partnership right now with Shanghai Jazz in Madison, fantastic restaurant and jazz venue in town. And they're doing specialty cocktails for us, the Monte Martini and the Diced With Old Fashioned, and you are a ticket holder for the Shakespeare Theater, you get a discount on those drinks. It's kind of great. So, we can all kind of work together and what is it, A rising tide raises all ships. So, we're trying to do that in our larger community there, but that's a new program we're doing this year that we're very excited to see where it goes. Our first night for that will actually be coming up in a couple of weeks.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (11:22):

That sounds like so much fun. Where can folks and business owners find out more about that?

BRIAN CROWE (11:29):

They can certainly go to our website, shakespearenj.org, or they can call our offices and that number's on our website as well. There are a few different options for that.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (11:37):

Wonderful, wonderful. So hopefully everyone listening will go and do that right now. But I'd also like to touch on your educational programs and you also offer classics for kids, and I want to know how our audiences can get involved, how can their children get involved? Just tell me a little bit about that.

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BRIAN CROWE (11:58):

Yeah, I was talking earlier about how people are sometimes confused in whether Shakespeare is for them or classic theater is for them, and I think it's for everybody. Come out, have a great time, we'd love to have you here. But I think one of the biggest challenges we have are the youngest audiences, the newer audiences, and that's the kids. And you think Shakespeare and people are like, oh, maybe I don't bring my 10-year-old to that. And I think there's actually a lot of fun Shakespeare we do that 10-year-olds would love. We specifically have our short Shakespeare program in the spring. We have summer camp for kids in the summer. All those things are there. But the newest program we have, we launched last year "Classics for Kids," and it's an opportunity for young parents specifically and their kids, and it can be five and up and sometimes we had even some younger kids in there last year to come and see great classic children's literature live on stage in a compelling, visually exciting dynamic way and a way to welcome and let families know that they are welcome into our space, into the theater.

BRIAN CROWE (12:51):

Last year we did "The Little Prince," we did "The Snow Queen," and we brought in the amazing Tanglewood Marionettes who did a production of "The Dragon King," which is a beautiful piece. This year we are launching with, and actually our first one is, next one is June 1st, Saturday, June 1st with "The Velveteen Rabbit." Great beautiful story that we all, many of us know from growing up. So, we're doing that. And then later in the season we're bringing back Tanglewood Marionettes for "Arabian Adventures," which is a spin on "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" story and many other things going on this year. So, we hope to bring families in for that, but they can check that out on our website as well.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (13:28):

I love that. I am not a parent, but my algorithm seems to think I am, I guess because I have conversations like this a lot. I'm actually the child. That's the trick here. I'm the one who wants to go see this.

BRIAN CROWE (13:40):

Be the child at all times. Refuse to grow up. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (13:42):

Exactly. Yes. That's what artists are for, right? None of us want to grow up. I am curious about how you balance your broader work as an artistic director with the more focused work of directing individual

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productions. Like we were saying that you're directing "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," but I so admire directors and how specifically theater directors because I know how difficult it is. So, I would love to hear about your process and how you manage to straddle both of those worlds.

BRIAN CROWE (14:15):

I will say five months into the gig, I'm still figuring out that balance. This is the first show I'm directing while also in this chair. But I think the key always has been and always will be to have a great team and how you approach the work so that while I'm in the rehearsal room, I know that our staff, our amazing staff, is behind the scenes continuing the work moving forward. We've talked a lot before the season got started on what we want to do, what we are doing, what directions we need to move forward to continue this, inviting more people into the theater, what major campaigns we have going on. Those are in process, so I have the ability to be in the room to focus on that. And then the second I'm out of that room, I'm focusing on all the other challenges we have and not just challenges, but the exciting new programs we have running. So having a trust within the staff and excitement about the staff has helped that happen really easily.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:07):

Well collaboration is key, but you're such a lovely high energy personality that I'm sure that working with you is wonderful for the staff and beneficial to that relationship all around.

BRIAN CROWE (15:21):

I hope so. I do think I'm very high energy and sometimes that's a good thing and sometimes we just got to keep moving, so-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:26):

Well, that's like everything in life. We need balance, but I think I would love working with you. I would say I'm not as high energy, so I would probably get tired because what do they call that when you just kind of like, I don't know, I get tired watching other people thinking, oh my gosh, how do you maintain that energy? And I'm like, I've slept for two hours and I don't know how to breathe anymore, but this is not a therapy session for me.

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BRIAN CROWE (15:53):

No, no. But I will say one thing that's really helpful is to, and this an old adage, if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life and there is a lot of work to be done. I think there's a misconception that if we're as theater people, we just go out and we have fun all day long and we have a lot of fun, but there's a lot of work that goes into making really great art and keeping these community connections going on and educating young people and welcoming families in. I mean, there's a lot of work that goes into it, but when you get to work at a job that you love doing the thing you love, it really helps quite a bit. And that's a real battery charger.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (16:25):

Absolutely. And I think that's a really important message. It's something, like you said, it's an old adage, but I wish that more people really took it to heart. Not that we have much of an option. There are plenty of people who don't have that option in a capitalist world, but I wish for everyone that they can find that, they can find a job that they actually enjoy and ideally love. So, congratulations to you and your team just for having found a world that you can work in happily. And what did you say, this is your 29th year, so obviously it's going well for you. This is going to be a really exciting season for many reasons, but I'd like to know what you specifically are most excited about that's coming up.

BRIAN CROWE (17:11):

I think a lot of our expansion and expansion of old programs in return, some programs, as I keep saying, bring new people in, what's always been exciting to me. I was in education before and I'm always still going to be in education, but it's seeing parents watch their kids either perform or in the audience understand Shakespeare is thrilling. And so, in the same way, I'm excited to see more honesty is coming in and seeing how much of what the Shakespeare Theatre has to offer both in the main stage work we do and the education programs we have and the programs for young people. We have a Shakespeare book club online for adult learners, all these things that we do, giving them opportunities to come in, welcome them into the theater and see what we have to offer there. So that's something that's kind of what I'm hoping to see moving forward. And I think I got off your question. What was your question again?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (18:03):

Oh, no, I think you answered it. It was just what are you most excited about?

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BRIAN CROWE (18:07):

Oh, it's definitely that it's getting new people in and making new connections. We have some "Lend Us Your Ears" play reading series. It's something that went on hiatus during Covid. It's one night only readings with amazing actors, and we do a variety of plays there. This year we're focusing on Shakespeare specifically. Our first one is Monday, June 10th, and we're doing "Cymbeline," which is one of Shakespeare's kind of fairytale plays. It's very fun and thrilling and some great, great stories. You'll see connections to kind of old fairytales with the evil queen and the young adventurous young woman who saves the day and all that stuff. It's great.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (18:41):

I love to hear how diverse your lineup is.

BRIAN CROWE (18:46):

Yeah, Shakespeare's always been one of our best sellers. We're not going to lose Shakespeare, so we've got actually three Shakespeare connected plays this year. We have, "As You Like It" on our outdoor stage, Jemma Alix Levy is coming in to direct that. She's a new director with us this year and thrilled to have her in for that beautiful space on the outdoor stage on the campus of St. Elizabeth University. We encourage families to come out there. Great benefit of that, we have a sponsorship that allows us to give all kids free tickets to that performance. So, it's a great one for families to have a beautiful night of "Shakespeare Under the Stars" and the kids go for free. It's going to be a delight. So we have that. We have "Macbeth," as you mentioned earlier in the fall, which is going to be our big fall slot show there.

BRIAN CROWE (19:28):

I love this play. It's the first play I directed first Shakespeare play I directed in college, and I've come back to it several times. Excited to get back in with this particular team going into this show. That's our big fall show just in time for Halloween. Excited about that. And then the other Shakespeare related play is a fairly new play by Lauren Gunderson. Bonnie J. Monte's directing this production. It's called "The Book of Will." "The Book of Will" is kind of the untold story, now told, of the two actors seven years after Shakespeare died, they went on a mission to gather all the plays he wrote and put them together in one single document, which was the first folio. If they had not done this over half of Shakespeare's plays we would not have today at all. They completely would've been lost to history. So, the fact that we have the entire canon because of these dynamic artists who just against all odds found a way to raise up this amazing language and these wonderful stories that Shakespeare created or borrowed and recreated is a

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wonderful story about friendship and legacy and the importance of art in the longer scale history of who we are as a humanity and how we all connect together through that.

BRIAN CROWE (20:43):

So that's really exciting. So that's our Shakespeare part, half of the season, non-Shakespeare, half the season, obviously we have "[A] Gentleman's Guide to Love [and Murder]," and I'm thrilled about that. That is a musical comedy that I think if people aren't used to musical comedies, I think they will still love this one. And if you love musical comedies, you'll definitely love this show. It centers around Monte Navarro who finds out that he is eighth in line to be Earl of Highhurst Castle. He didn't know this growing up, his family, his mother was disinherited, so he had no idea. So finds this out as a young man, goes to seek the family for some assistance and a job, and look, I'm part of this family and they all reject him, and so he finds an alternate way to the earldom and I'll let audiences figure out what that is.

BRIAN CROWE (21:25):

But the title is "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," and it's a delightful comedy, lots of fun, and based on, some people might know the film it's based on also, which is the 1940s film "Kind Hearts and Coronets" with Sir Alec Guinness who plays in that movie, six of the ill-fated heirs that meet their doom. And on our production, we have an amazing actor doing eight of those roles that meet their doom in comic, ever escalating comic disasters. So that starts off our season, as I said earlier. Then we have at the end of the summer, early fall, we have Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility," her first book that she wrote actually under a pseudonym, and it's just a delightful story. Missy Sturgis is coming in to direct that she hasn't been with the company for a while, thrilled to have her back first time as a director for us, although she'd been doing directing elsewhere.

BRIAN CROWE (22:21):

It's just a delightful story about sisterhood and also all that delightful, Jane Austen longing and language and beauty and all that. And with "Bridgerton" just launching very soon. Actually by this time, this podcast, it'll be ready for the second half of this season. It's perfect timing for that. And if you like "Bridgerton", you're going to love sense and sensibility. Then obviously the holiday show this year is "A Christmas Carol," which we love bringing back and our Christmas Carol's a bit different than what a lot of theaters will do. There's a lot of grand, epic, large Christmas Carols and what I love about the Christmas Carol we do, which is Neil Bartlett's adaptation of "A Christmas Carol," is this a smaller cast. I find it deliciously dark in places where it needs to be so that the reward and that transformation that

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Scrooge goes through, it's just so much more rewarding. It's great. It's very theatrical and imaginative. And Paul Mullins, who's been with the company for years is directing that this year. Such a delightful artist, and I can't wait to see what he does with it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (23:16):

I love everything you just said so much, and I appreciate that you pointed out "Bridgerton." I think that it's important to tie that to the period pieces that we'll see on stage, because if you're not familiar with theater or stage shows, it helps to have some kind of comparative example. So, "Bridgerton" guys, if you like "Bridgerton" and you like period pieces, you should be watching pretty much the entire lineup at the Shakespeare Theatre -

BRIAN CROWE (23:42):

Oh, absolutely, absolutely, this year. "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" - if you like "Gilded Age" and "Downton Abbey," we're right in that same era, and it's the beautiful costumes in this show that our entire staff has created is beautiful.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (23:56):

Oh, those are some more really good comps. I like both of those also, and now I want get my ticket, so I'll be doing that as soon as we end this, I'll probably be getting my ticket for "A Gentleman's Guide."

BRIAN CROWE (24:06):

Fantastic. I will say that as a caveat, there is as much love as in those other shows, but there's a lot more murder in ours than you'll see in the other shows, so just be aware.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (24:14):

Well, I don't know, that might make it more fun, Brian. I think the murder is what makes it more fun.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (24:21):

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" will run through June 9th at the Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey in Madison.

For a full calendar of events at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, including the shows mentioned in today's episode, visit shakespearenj.org.

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This episode was hosted, edited and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. And my thanks to today's guest, Brian Crowe for his time. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts podcast. Thanks for listening!

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