

Q & A

with Wallis
Artist-in-Residence

MICHAEL ARDEN



Q: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE *MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG AS YOUR FIRST PRODUCTION AS THE WALLIS ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE?*

A: *Merrily* has always fascinated me because of its backwards structure and incredibly relatable characters. *Merrily*, and the play it's based on by Kauffman and Hart, requires more of the audience than a normal musical. I've always been interested in theater that engages the audience as an active participant, that asks you to meet what's coming at you from the stage half-way.

Q: REWINDING THE CLOCK, WHEN DID YOU FIRST ENCOUNTER *MERRILY*?

A: I acted in a production in my junior year of high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy. I understudied the role of Frank and was in the ensemble, and I quickly fell in love with it. Looking back on this now nearly twenty years later, the play takes on a completely different meaning for me - which I think is the genius of the piece. No matter where you are in life, you will see yourself in the characters at a certain point in the timeline of the play.

Q: THIS FALL YOU PRODUCED POP-UP SONDHEIM FOR OUR WELCOME FEST, AND SELECTED "GOOD THING GOING" AND "NOT A DAY GOES BY" FROM *MERRILY FOR YOURSELF TO SING*. WHAT ABOUT THE SCORE SPEAKS TO YOU?

A: What I love about the score is that the songs work on several levels. They work just as songs. "Good Thing Going" (covered by Sinatra) is incredibly "hummable", becoming something of a standard, yet it, like all of the songs, takes on incredible meaning and complexity when put in context of the story. Because the show takes place backwards, the score is like a symphony heard in reverse. The opening number sounds like a closing number and the closing number sounds like the opening number. We hear the reprise of a song before the actual song. Yet, it's still one of Sondheim's most beautiful and accessible scores. Sondheim has said he has never written about himself, but the closest thing to recounting an experience from his own life is "Opening Doors" in Act Two, which he took from his time as a young songwriter living in New York.

Q: IT STRIKES ME THAT WHAT WAS CRITICIZED OF THE ORIGINAL BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF *MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG* - THAT THE CHARACTERS WERE TOO COMPLEX, THE NON-LINEAR STORY TOO CONFUSING, THE CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN CULTURE TOO HARSH - ARE NOW THE HALLMARKS OF WHAT WE LOVE ABOUT BINGE-WORTHY TELEVISION, MEGA-NOVELS—

A: -And theater! I think we're just processing information, particularly entertainment, in a completely

different way than we ever have before. I think they wrote this musical a little before its time because I can't imagine anyone having a hard time following this now. If anything, *Merrily* provides an opportunity for reflection. I have always been fascinated by morality plays - which is what also drew me to *Spring Awakening* - and through watching this cautionary tale through the memory of the life that was Franklin Shepard, we can ask ourselves, "What choices have I made that have gotten me where I am? What choices can I make to take me in the direction I want to go?"

- William Nedved.

Interview has been edited and condensed.

MICHAEL ARDEN DIRECTS ANOTHER TIME-HOPPING TALE OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP THIS SUMMER:

THE WALLIS PRODUCTION OF

THE PRIDE

By Alexi Kaye Campbell
Directed by Michael Arden

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