

Director Sarah Rasmussen Rides the Cyclone: On Gratitude, Collaboration, and Art That Wakes Us Up to Our Daily Lives

Sarah Rasmussen sat down for an interview with Artistic Engagement Manager Paula Alekson to speak about her return to the rehearsal room, what excites her about directing this musical at this moment, and other related topics both profound and whimsical.

Sarah, at long last you are getting to return to the rehearsal room as a director, engage in a creative process with designers and actors, and share your collaborative artistry with audiences. How does it feel to be back?

There's just such an overwhelming sense of gratitude to be back in the room, back in a creative process. For many of us, this is our first show back since the beginning of the pandemic. I've never had this long of a stretch since I was a teenager of not directing. I think we all feel grateful to be doing what we love, and honestly, I think it, it all feels more poignant and special and meaningful. And it's a great opportunity: what do we want to say? How do we want to give audiences a gift that we hope will be both really fun and entertaining, but also good for peoples' hearts and souls after all we've been through?

Was there anything you learned about creating art or yourself as an artist in that time you've been away from the rehearsal room?

Yes, I think that's still unfolding for me. It's been such a surreal and overwhelming two years, a time of a lot of reflection. During the pandemic, we spent so much time at McCarter really thinking about what we value as an organization and articulating that mission and vision and the values of joy and justice and beauty and belonging. And while that work was not directing a play, I have been really moved to see how these values feel like they're really informing how we're working in a rehearsal process."

Could you share a bit about your past relationship with *Ride the Cyclone: The Musical*, what inspired you to return to it, and what most excites you about sharing it with the McCarter audience in this moment?

I fell in love with this musical about six years ago. I loved the work that I saw, and I felt compelled to spend time with the piece as a director. So, I pushed hard for many years to get the chance to work on it, and it is a great honor in my life that the producer who held the rights to *Ride the Cyclone*—Kevin McCollum, who has a fantastic history with new musicals with a ton of relevance and heart like *Rent* and *Six* and other musicals that have changed how we see the form of a musical—trusted me to take the piece and, and working with designers as storytellers, continue to evolve it.

This script is like a beautiful poem—with some breath and mystery—for the designers to say, “Okay, now this happens,” and the story gets carried by lights, by sound, by projection, by costumes. It’s rare to find pieces that have so much room for interpretation for director-designer collaboration. That’s very exciting to me.

I loved working on this piece so much in 2019 at the Jungle Theater in Minneapolis; it was a powerful experience. And it was a joyful experience for the audience. I was amazed to see how audiences all got to go on a ride together, and yet there was space in the piece for audiences to individually find themselves in it. I think it’s a rare story that can be specific, but also open for people to bring their own lived experience to it.

I wasn’t done with it, and maybe it wasn’t done with me yet. It’s been wonderful to explore it again. Of course, whenever we do shows they speak to the current moment. *Ride the Cyclone* feels different in *this* moment; it feels more poignant, honestly, after all we’ve been through.

***Ride the Cyclone* is an imaginative piece and you’ve assembled a fantastically imaginative creative team to collaborate with you in the making of it. Could you provide some intel on the hallmarks of your collaboration for this production and maybe highlight one aspect of the production that you are most excited about sharing with the audience.**

My favorite thing about directing is the collaboration. Director Garland Wright used to say “Theater is the shared act of imagining between artist and audience.” The magic of collaboration is that we each bring our own unique perspective, and yet we make something bigger than the sum of its parts. This collaboration fires on so many cylinders: there are projections and video and light and set and sound, that all support the music and movement. That kind of design requires a lot of shared imagining. We are making something immersive and detailed that still has space for the audience to share in the imaginative journey.

Also, there’s a kind of childlike wonder and surprise to this piece, and it’s been especially fun to work with the incredible production staff at McCarter to figure out how we essentially do the impossible with this Rubik’s cube of a set where things are automated, they move, and there are hidden tricks. It takes a lot of incredible brains to figure out how to make magic happen in a way that is mindful of budget and that is safe and is accessible for all of our cast members.

Sarah, for you and three of your creative team collaborators—Costumer Designer Trevor Bowen, Music Director Mark Christine, and Choreographer Jim Lichtscheidl—this production is a reunion. What excites you about working with your friends again?

Trevor and Mark and Jim and I have now done a couple of musicals together, and I think that sort of through line that I love about working with them is that they really each think about their work from the actor-character perspective, building on the unique strengths that a performer brings. So, Jim, who is an actor in the show in addition to being the choreographer, starts any process by having actors just move as people, as their characters, and then he builds on what delights the actor. Mark began his career as an actor and is also a fabulous music director. He’s

an amazing teacher and coach, who works from the philosophy of “Let's find your strengths, and let's work from that and let them blossom.” And Trevor works from such a place of, “I want to talk with the actor about who their character is and what they need to do on stage” and then he acts very collaboratively in facilitating that.

I wouldn't say that any of us came from “traditional” musical-theater training. We all really come from different theater and collaborative backgrounds, which allows us to have our own original take on what it is to make a musical, and especially a new kind of musical. We love the kind of stories that allow artists to take on new challenges. Listen, I love musical theater, and there are great musicals out there, but I want to continue to expand the stories we are telling and who gets to be a lead in a musical.

What are some aspects of this particular musical that informed the casting of this production and the types of actors you were interested in auditioning?

Ride the Cyclone has a lot of heart to it and a lot of depth. It also has a lot of comedy, and I think comedy always works best when it's rooted in real emotional reality. In our audition process, we sought out people who have a depth and heart, who are also wildly playful and imaginative about creating a wild and surreal kind of world.

I cannot be more excited about this cast. They all bring so many talents to the table. And every day we discover more talents that they have and try to find places to work those in. Also, there's inspiration within the script and a lot of space for them to make these characters their own, make the musical interpretation their own, make the comedy their own. This allows for a lot of agency on the part of each performer. And that feels really exciting!

Five of the six adult actors cast in *Ride the Cyclone* play teenagers, which made me wonder what you were you like as a teenager, Sarah, and what about the musical most resonates with your eternal inner teenager?

I'm vicariously living out my dream, directing *Ride the Cyclone*. My dream as a teenager would have been to be in a musical. I really, really wanted to be in a musical, but that was not something that happened in the town that I grew up in. So, thinking back to my teenage years, I did start directing for that reason, because there was no theater.

I mean, I wish I could have been directing musicals as a teenager, but I didn't know how to put all of that together yet, so I started by directing plays. But I think back very specifically to this memory of me in my bedroom trying to adapt *Alice in Wonderland* and listening to my CD of *Rent*. That kind of is this show in a weird way! *Rent* meets down the rabbit hole or *Wizard of Oz* meets *Our Town*...I'm living out some early artistic dreams on this project!

There's a part of me that still feels very connected to that time period of life. That period in life is a never-ending, fascinating place to look for inspiration. I've done a lot of shows about teenagers recently—*Little Women* and *The Wolves* and *Ride the Cyclone*. I think it's a powerful

time because it's a time when we're discovering ourselves; we're thinking about who we are and what matters and why.

Sarah, as you've been sharing your directorial vision for this musical you've touched on a theme that the story poses in the form of a question: "What makes a life well lived?" What would be your answer to this in the current moment of your life?

This musical reminds me to be present, or to try to be present.

There are some major *Our Town* allusions in this musical. You know that Emily Webb question? I'm paraphrasing, "Do real people know they're living their life while they're living it?" And the Stage Manager says, "Saints and poets, they do some." This musical, it doesn't have easy answers, but I think it keeps intently whispering, "Pay attention. Take it in. Be with the inevitable discomfort of being human, but also be with the possibility. And be with the wonder and beauty of it too."

I love a piece of art that can hold both of those things and honor both of those things, the very real grief that we go through and also the good things that happen as well. I think the art that I'm interested in wakes us up to our daily lives.

Closing this interview with a bit of whimsy: In the course of *Ride the Cyclone*, each of the teens are introduced through their astrological sign, a high-school or hometown superlative, a musical style/genre, and through a song with a telling title. Could you introduce yourself to McCarter and *Ride the Cyclone* audiences using this format?

Astrological sign: Scorpio...Scorpio/Libra rising. Scorpio is all that kind of mysterious secretive intensity—my internal artist thing—but Libra rising seems to be that external leadership thing in some kind of dialogue.

High-school or hometown superlative: Most likely to sneak out of class to go into the art room, or most likely to be reading a book in gym class.

Musical style or genre: Musical theater pastiche...the *Six*, *Cyclone* thing that lets you go in a lot of directions. I confuse Spotify...everything from classical choral music to Lizzo to some old school country...with some music for my kids thrown in there, too.

Your song with a telling title: "Our Town Sleepover." I was obsessed with that show. Around fifth grade I saw it and I taped it onto VHS—the Spalding gray version—and I love, love, loved to that play. It's been a very important artistic touchstone of my life, partly because I grew up in a very small town. *Ride the Cyclone* is definitely in conversation with it.

Is there a production of *Our Town* in McCarter's and your future?

Maybe! It's really special to me that it had its world premiere here. I think the character of Constance in *Ride the Cyclone* is an homage to Emily Webb in many ways. It's wild and magical to me that *Our Town* premiered just on the other side of the theater's back wall.