



Surflight Sings in Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road

Maddie Orton (00:02):

I am Maddie Orton, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. You may or may not be familiar with Hoagy Carmichael, but you certainly know his songs. Chances are you've even plunked out one of his tunes on a piano. ["Heart and Soul" plays] he composer behind "Heart and Soul," "Georgia on my Mind," "The Nearness of You," and "Stardust" is celebrated through the musical Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road. With only one previous professional production, the musical will find new audiences this September, as part of Surflight Theater's 75th anniversary season. I spoke with Producing Artistic Director Steve Steiner and the show's Musical Director Nick Kaminski about Surflight, Long Beach Island, and their upcoming production of Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road. Take a listen.

Steve, Nick, thank you so much for joining me. It's so nice to see you both.

Steve Steiner (00:55):

Glad to be here.

Nick Kaminski:

Yeah!

Maddie Orton (00:57):

How's life down at the shore? I haven't been down the summer and it's actually killing me a little bit.

Steve Steiner (01:02):

It's going very well here. We're very pleased with what's happening with us as well as what's happening on the island. It feels very much like pre-pandemic times.

Maddie Orton (01:12):

That's great. I'll be heading down to Long Beach Island at some point this year, and we're recording this in August, so I know that might sound kind of late, but the LBI season really is much longer than just the summer months, right?

Steve Steiner (01:25):

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Absolutely. As a matter of fact, September and early October are referred to as “local summer” because all of the folks that live and work here are working 24/7 during late June to Labor Day. And so in September, while their businesses remain open, they're not as busy and they get to actually enjoy living here and being here, and the beach is much less crowded, and the weather is superb, and the water temperature's warmer, all the good stuff.

Maddie Orton (02:02):

That's a really good selling point. And your season goes through December, is that right?

Steve Steiner (02:07):

That's correct.

Maddie Orton (02:08):

Why did SurfFlight begin originally? Do you know anything about that history?

Steve Steiner (02:12):

Joe Hayes invested in a show in New York that was having trouble getting investors, and he had worked in New York and other theaters as a performer primarily, although he had started some directing. And that show brought him a surprising windfall 'cause he invested a small amount of money, but the show was Guys and Dolls.

Maddie Orton (02:38):

Oh my gosh.

Steve Steiner (02:40):

And so he used that money to start his dream summer theater. He came to Long Beach Island in 1949, fell in love with it, and opened the theater in a big amphitheater in the 1950s. It was three weeks. It was outdoors. It rained a lot, 2200 seats or something like that. It was ridiculous. The next year he went someplace else, I think it was a former meat market, and then someplace else after that. And then in 1954, he landed in a former mechanics garage on Engleside Avenue at 211 Engleside Avenue, and it was just a tin roof building, and it had 312 chairs if you had a shoehorn. And they were all folding chairs, and their stage was at one end, six of the intern boys lived in a corner of the other end of the thing. It was crazy. There were no bathrooms.

(03:42):

You had to walk down to Borough Hall.

Maddie Orton:

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Oh my gosh.

Steve Steiner:

But it operated there until 1986, and then in 1985 or 6, there was a terrible nightclub fire. You may have heard of it. It was up in Rhode Island, and a couple hundred people died in that fire because it was pyrotechnics that the band was using, and there was only one exit and nobody could get out, and it was just awful. So the fire marshall started getting really picky about things, and deservedly so, especially on the East coast. And so they condemned the building as a public meeting place, and the choice was either to build a new theater or stop. And the guys that were running it at the time, Scott Henderson and some other investors sold stock in HML Corporation, I think it was called, because it was all for-profit in those days, and they were able to raise the \$1.9 million to build the new building. And that's when the new building was built in 1987, and the old building became the scene shop, and the prop shop, and the costume shop, and everything, because it could be used, it just couldn't be used as a public meeting place. And then in 2007, we took that building down and on the exact footprint built what is now our scene shop, prop shop, paint shop on the first floor, and the second two floors are housing for up to 33 people

Maddie Orton (05:21):

Wow, that's great.

Steve Steiner (05:22):

Kitchen, laundry and all kinds of stuff. And so that was built in 2007.

Maddie Orton (05:26):

I did not realize that this was the theater that Guys and Dolls built. That's wild to me. I love that. Oh my gosh.

Steve Steiner (05:32):

Yes.

Maddie Orton (05:38):

Surflight is a theater that kind of has to serve everybody on the island, right? So it's got to be kind of challenging to program a season that pleases so many people. How do you find that balance, and then I guess we should talk about where Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road fits into that.

Steve Steiner (05:56):

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Sure. I'll do a little bit, and you might want to talk about a little that too because I know you get it. We actually have several different constituencies and groups of patrons that we program to and program differently for those patrons. When we operate in April, May, June, those months are for primarily groups that travel anywhere from locally to Staten Island and Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. At our height in 2009, we did 466 groups averaging 37 people. We are back up. This year it's going to be back up over 300. So we're building--we were building back, and then the pandemic hit. Of course, now we're building back again. So that's that constituency, which is not to say that they don't come in July and August. July and August, we try to program primarily for people that are on vacation or have summer homes that visit here on the weekends. And then in November and December while we get groups from all over the place, that's when the locals really can come because they're not doing their other things because most of the other businesses or the majority other businesses are not operating with the exception of the restaurants. December is one of our biggest shows. Last year it was the biggest show. The year before, it was the biggest show in terms of attendance. So yeah, it tends to be a very, very big deal for people to come here and see whatever we're doing in December.

Maddie Orton (07:43):

And what is your December show this year?

Steve Steiner (07:45):

Miracle on 34th Street.

Maddie Orton (07:47):

Oh, that's nice.

Steve Steiner (07:48):

Which is the great story that we love, made better by the music of Meredith Wilson.

Maddie Orton (07:54):

Oh my gosh. Music Man's Meredith Wilson!

Steve Steiner (07:57):

That's right.

Maddie Orton (07:59):

Very cool.

Steve Steiner (08:00):

When he wrote it, it was called Here's Love, which had a respectable Broadway run.

Maddie Orton (08:06):

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Yes, I think I've heard of that!

Steve Steiner (08:06):

The title just is just, is not Miracle on 34th Street. The rights house has since recently, somewhat recently, retitled to be that title, because that's what it is.

Maddie Orton (08:24):

Yeah, that's probably a good choice. I mean, one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you about Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road is that it's a show I had not heard of. So how did you come upon it and decide to include it in the season?

Steve Steiner (08:38):

Well, the agent for the writers of the show knew me from when he used to work at Rodgers and Hammerstein's Music Library—you know, the licensing house. And he got in touch with me just on a kind of cold call, except he knew me, and he said, "Would you be interested in this?" I said, "Well, it sounds really interesting". He said, "Well, Hoagy's son, Hoagy Bix Carmichael is. I said, "I can't really look at it. I'm out in Laguna Beach." I was directing once for Laguna Playhouse at the time, and he said, "Well, Hoagy's going to be in Southern California next week. Can he come and do a presentation?" I said, "Well, sure. I'd love to meet him." So he came and met me at Laguna Playhouse and brought some video stuff and brought the script, and I listened to some of the recordings of the arrangements, and I read the script and it really felt like a good fit. And when we figured out when to do it, I called the agent back and said, "Yeah, we'd like to do this." Hoagy Bix was delightful. He's not a young man. I mean, you could probably Google him. I know he's older than I am, but he was really excited about getting this show out. And it had played at the York Theater in New York, an off-Broadway one, and had a really respectable run there. And in fact, the guitarist for our run played that run.

Maddie Orton (10:11):

Nick, I think you and I are upon a quick Google search, I think similar in age. I did not know the name Hoagy Carmichael, which is kind of embarrassing because I know so much of his catalog.

Steve Steiner (10:26):

The songs are amazing.

Maddie Orton (10:27):

Songs are incredible. Did you know his work, or did you know his name? You certainly knew his work. I assume.

Nick Kaminski (10:33):

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I didn't know his name. After Steve told me what the show was, and I looked it up and I was, "Oh, I know all of it." Because the show starts with just four bars of "Heart and Soul," which is the first thing anybody learns on a piano, and that's how the show starts. So as soon as the audience hears that, if they don't know his name, they're immediately going to know, oh, I at least know that tune. But going through the catalog in the show, there's 39 songs in the show. I think I'm correct, and I wound up knowing about half of them despite not--I don't think I've ever heard the name Hoagy Carmichael before being attached to this.

Steve Steiner:

I first heard the name Hoagy Carmichael when I was about 10, and I told this to Hoagy Bix, and he really loved it because he was aware of it too. Back in the fifties and the sixties when The Flintstones were first run on television, they used to have guest stars.

Maddie Orton (11:36):

Oh, sure.

Steve Steiner (11:36):

Like Ann Margaret was Ann Margarock. And Hoagy Carmichael was a guest star on The Flintstones, and that's how I first hear his name.

Maddie Orton (11:46):

What's so funny though, is that is kind of how you get introduced to people like that if you're not of that generation necessarily. But yeah, things like seeing a guest spot on The Flintstones is sort of what introduces people to these things. That's so funny. And then shows like this, obviously, bring the name to a different generation who might already know the music but not be as familiar with him.

Nick Kaminski (12:13):

Going through. I was like, "Oh, I know that. I know that. I know that. I know that." Before the season started, I went down to Larry Yurman's apartment who conceived and arranged the show, and he sat down and just played through the whole score for me so I could take notes on it. No recordings of it yet. So new.

Maddie Orton (12:31):

That's very cool.

Nick Kaminski (12:32):

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And I don't know if one's in the works, so the only person I had to play it for me was Larry, who did all the arrangements for it. And just going through, it's like, "Oh, I recognize that tune. I recognize that tune."

Maddie Orton (12:42):

It must be kind of a neat challenge to take on a show where there's no cast recording, and you're kind of just going off of working with the arranger and then working off the music.

Nick Kaminski (12:53):

Yeah, because usually when I've done music direction for a show this young, it's in a workshop or development setting, not the first production that doesn't have the team, the original team involved with it. Right. It's interesting to be not developing this new show, but performing it and setting it as it is.

Maddie Orton (13:18):

I found an interview with Hoagy B. Carmichael, as you said, Hoagy Carmichael's son, and he talked about this show and said that the show is not a review and it's not biographical. What is the concept of the show?

Steve Steiner (13:33):

The eras that Hoagy was writing.

Maddie Orton (13:36):

So tell me a little bit about that. What is the experience?

Steve Steiner (13:40):

There's the opening, and then it goes to the Club, which is the club Old Man Harlem, New York City, and then it moves to USO canteen. He was writing during the war years. And then there's the Hollywood years, the movie musical years, and then there's, they end up in the Stardust Roadhouse. It's actually seven friends sort of traveling through these eras with Hoagy's music.

Maddie Orton (14:07):

Oh, I love that.

Nick Kaminski (14:08):

And there is a loose plot to it. We don't have book scenes or anything like that in the show, but there are through lines and stuff happens.

Steve Steiner:

And people do speak as well as sing, so it's not just singing.

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Maddie Orton (14:20):

Sure. When you're crafting a show like this, Nick, do you have to sort of keep in mind what the sound of that era was as you're musically directing? Or does it just sort of come naturally through the music?

Nick Kaminski (14:33):

Yeah. I try to keep the music direction period and the vocal direction and that, because the stuff that's going to take place in the thirties, forties in this is going to sound different than the fifties and sixties stuff towards the end of the show, where we've got—"Heart and Soul" in this show is more akin to a doowop rock and roll version of it as if The Penguins were covering it, sort of like their cover of "Blue Moon." So it's very similar to that. So that's going to be directed differently than the 1940s war music, which is closer to the Andrew Sisters or stuff like that. Which is a neat challenge in the show to have one composer, but a vast range of styles and eras to emulate.

Maddie Orton (15:20):

Yeah, that sounds really fun. Also, those are just very fun eras of music in general to listen to, and I'm sure to perform.

Steve Steiner (15:26):

They really are. And Larry did an extraordinary job--Larry Yurman--with both the orchestrations and with the vocal arrangements. They're incredible vocal arrangements.

Nick Kaminski:

Yeah, they're really, really tough. I'm learning them on my own to teach, and they're really great, and they're really going to put our actors through their paces when they have to do that while tapping, so.

Maddie Orton (15:51):

While tapping. That's never easy.

Nick Kaminski:

Yes.

Steve Steiner (15:53):

An extraordinary director, director choreographer, I should say Paula Hammond Sloan. She does a lot of work for us, but she's also done like 14 national tours.

Maddie Orton (16:03):

Wow. That's great.

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Nick Kaminski (16:05):

And her tap is unrivaled.

Maddie Orton (16:07):

I'm very excited. I love a tap show. I'm always there for a tap show. That's great. Very cool. Well, I will see you guys later this summer. I'll certainly be stopping by the theater and by Showplace, the ice cream shop. Thank you so much, and good luck with the show. It sounds like a lot of fun.

Steve Steiner (16:23):

Thanks. We're really looking forward to it.

Nick Kaminski:

Yeah.

Maddie Orton (16:27):

Hoagy Carmichael's Stardust Road runs from September 4th through 15th at SurfFlight Theatre. For more information, visit surflight.org.

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I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast, thanks for listening.

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