



For all the lightness and joy in "The Sound of Music," director Josh Rhodes wanted audiences to sense the looming danger the characters faced ahead of them.

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT TUESDAY, NOV. 26, 2019 1 month ago

## Director climbs new mountain for more dramatic vista

'The Sound of Music' is a pinnacle of classic musical theater. For Josh Rhodes, it was a peak experience.

by: **Marty Fugate** Contributor

"The Sound of Music" had giant talent behind it. Boasting compositions by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and a book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, the musical quickly found a huge audience. It became a Broadway blockbuster, a monster-hit movie. It's just plain big. It's the Matterhorn of musical theater. It dominates the landscape. Almost everybody's seen it. It's hard not to. So, how do you find a fresh take? Josh Rhodes was determined to try. He'd loved the musical as a kid. As an adult, he realized how much he'd missed. He made up his mind to find his own way up the mountain. And do his best not to fall off.

### **When was your first experience of this musical?**

My connection actually goes back before the movie. I fell in love with the album first. I found it in my parents' record collection, and instantly fell in love with it. I played the LP until the needle wore through and memorized the lyrics. I loved the music — and I really loved the musical when I saw the movie adaptation on television, during the annual broadcast on NBC. At 15, I even got to participate in a stage production! I wasn't actually in the show. I was an apprentice backstage, as part of the running crew. I played the thunder. Like the days of old-time radio, I'd rattle a sheet of metal to make the sound effect. I was really, really bad at my job, but I tried.

### **How did Michael Donald Edwards pitch this to you?**

He just asked me what I thought about "The Sound of Music." I told him that it's been a favorite of mine since childhood. Then I asked for the script, to refresh myself on the stage version. I've seen the movie many times, but I hadn't read it or seen it staged since I was 15. Rereading the script with an adult mind, I kept discovering new things. It's filled with so many political ideas that were completely lost on me as a child.



One of the aspects of *The Sound of Music* that fascinated director Josh Rhodes was the state of denial that many of the characters clung to as the Nazis closed in on their way of life. Courtesy photos.

### **Like what?**

I felt that the playwrights were warning us of the dangers of neutrality. The musical's set in a time when Austria was on the precipice of a German takeover, either willingly or unwillingly. Many ordinary Austrians avoided taking sides — and lost that option after the Anschluss. The musical's adult characters are a microcosm of that. They're hoping the threat will blow over and trying to stay neutral until it does. To the writers, that's a false hope, and that really rings a bell for me. Yes, the songs are uplifting, but the story deals with serious issues. That surprised me. The writers put so much passion into this. The terrible war in Europe had been over for a decade, but they still had something to say about it. It's all about the small human choices — which side you're on and when you have to take a stand. That's the heart of the show, and what I wanted to open up for the audience.

### **"The Sound of Music" has a lighthearted, sentimental reputation. You're saying there's also a dark side?**

Absolutely. At the top of the show, the von Trapps are a broken family. Captain von Trapp is a widower, and he's shut down emotionally. Maria is lost. She's an orphan, and she's about to lose her home in the convent. Everybody has very high stakes in "The Sound of Music." Everybody needs to be saved. That's where the music comes in.

### **How so?**

When your heart is in a bad place, a song can do the trick. If you look at the first act, one character is usually singing to another to lift them up. I think that's what musicals do well — especially this one.

### **Are you creating new choreography?**

Yes, although there's actually very little choreography. There's some staging for the children, and one dance number for "Sixteen Going on Seventeen." I worked with Sinai Tabak, my dance arranger, to create new arrangements based on my choreographic concepts. The kids are still jumping around on the bed for "The Lonely Goatherd" during the thunderstorm, but I'm not following the original Broadway choreography.

### **What did you say to the actors in rehearsals?**

I asked them all to investigate this show as if they'd never seen it. "The Sound of Music" is part of our cultural library. We all think we know the characters. Maria should behave like this; the kids should do that. And there are all these cute bits from the movie we want to hold onto. Well, maybe we can let them go. Forget what you think you know and look at it with fresh eyes.

### **What amazing high technology did you use to re-create the Alps?**

I didn't. Our approach is actually low-tech — and I know that's defying expectations. As a director, you feel the pressure to put the Alps on stage, so Maria and the family can literally climb the mountain at the end. But I wanted to climb a new mountain. I talked to Paul Tate dePoo, our set designer, and we came up with one big metaphor that keeps reinventing itself. Instead of the typical mountains, we created a wall. It wraps around the stage, much like a mountain range. But it's just an old, stone wall — a metaphorical wall that's been painted with a mural of the Alps that's aged, crackling and broken apart. That's my new mountain. And it's really the heart of my production.

### **Where'd you get the idea?**

From the script itself — where I always get my ideas. Rereading the text, I was struck by how many times Mother Abbot tells Maria, "You cannot use these walls as a place to hide." She says that three times. Reading that, I heard the author's take on neutrality. And that's where I got the concept of the metaphorical wall.

### **If the wall is a metaphor, what does it stand for?**

It's a perfect physicalization for the futility of neutrality. It's a barrier, a way of shutting out the world. The wall set beautifully communicates that to the audience. You don't feel like you're outside in the Alps; you feel like the Alps are cradling you. And that's exactly the mindset of the characters. Everyone's hiding behind walls. They're all boxed away in their safe places, and in denial about what's coming. The characters think they can avoid big, bold decisions. But at some point, they'll either have to surrender to evil or climb the mountain. That gives us our big grand gesture when the characters we love climb the Alps to save themselves.

## **What does that salvation mean?**

It means you can't stay neutral in the face of true evil. There comes a time when you have to fight; when you have to stand up for yourself; when you have to climb a mountain. For Maria and the von Trapps, that meant the literal mountains of the Alps. But we all have mountains of our own.

## **Asolo Rep casts Maria for ‘Sound of Music’**

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By Jay Handelman

Arts Editor

Posted Sep 10, 2019 at 2:47 PM

### **Maddie Shea Baldwin will star in iconic role in fall production in Sarasota**

Maddie Shea Baldwin, who was featured in the original Broadway and national touring productions of the musical “Bright Star,” will star in the Asolo Repertory Theatre production of “The Sound of Music.”

Baldwin will play Maria von Trapp, one of the most iconic roles in the musical theater world, in the fall production that will be directed and choreographed by Josh Rhodes, who previously directed the Asolo Rep productions of “Guys and Dolls” and “Evita.”

The production runs Nov. 16-Dec. 28.

Single tickets for “The Sound of Music” and other shows in the Asolo Rep season go on sale to the general public at 12:01 a.m. Sept. 28 online ([asolorep.org](http://asolorep.org)) and at the box office (5555 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota) and by phone on Oct. 1 (941-351-8000).

Subscribers and donors may purchase single tickets beginning at 10 a.m. Sept. 6.

The season also includes “Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express” (Jan. 8-March 8); “The Lifespan of a Fact” (Jan. 22-March 19); “Into the Breeches” (Feb. 12-March 21); “The Great Leap” (March 18-April 11); the world premiere of the musical “Knoxville” (April 3-25); “Hood: A Robin Hood Musical Adventure” (May 7-31) and “Snow White” (June 11-28).

## The hills are alive

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By Jay Handelman

Arts Editor

Posted Nov 8, 2019 at 7:02 AM Updated Nov 9, 2019 at 3:05 PM

Maddie Shea Baldwin and a cast of mostly local children star in Asolo Rep's season-opening production of "The Sound of Music."

## **'The Sound of Music'**

Music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, book by Lindsey Howard and Russel Crouse. Directed and choreographed by Josh Rhodes. Runs Wednesday through Dec. 28, Asolo Repertory Theatre, 5555 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. 941-351-8000; [asolorep.org](http://asolorep.org)

It may be sheer coincidence, but the Asolo Repertory Theatre's production of "The Sound of Music" has its official opening Saturday night, exactly 60 years after the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical's debut on Broadway.

It proved to be the final collaboration between the groundbreaking creative team who built the most successful musical partnership in theater history.

The local production, which opens the theater's 61st season, follows a long line of musicals — from "Show Boat" and "1776" to "My Fair Lady" and "Guys and Dolls" — the theater has re-examined since Michael Donald Edwards became producing artistic director 13 years ago.

And it brings back Josh Rhodes, who, after a career as a dancer in such shows as "Chicago," "Bells are Ringing" and "Fosse," got his start as a choreographer in the 2008 Sarasota production of "Working." He has since directed and choreographed "Guys and Dolls" and "Evita" at the theater he considers his "artistic home."

Rhodes promises that this new "Sound of Music" will not be anything revolutionary, but may be different, especially for those, like Edwards, who only know the musical from the 1965 film version with Julie Andrews. (The film will be shown on ABC on Dec. 15.)

"I don't want to set everybody's expectations that they're going to walk into 'The Sound of Music' 3.0 or on the moon or something," Rhodes said. "We were making jokes on the first day with the cast that we're not going to do it in a pool of blood."

What Rhodes and his cast are promising is to look at the show with fresh eyes, and to perform a few songs fans of the film may not recognize.

"I love the show so much. I want everybody in the theater to hear the lines and hear the lyrics and music as freshly as we can make it," he said. "I don't want to take anything for

granted. I don't want to follow past productions physically. I just want to honor what's on the page and what the authors' intentions were."

Richard Rodgers wrote the music and Oscar Hammerstein II the lyrics to a score that includes "Do-Re-Mi," "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," "My Favorite Things" and the title song. The book was written by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, based on a memoir by Maria von Trapp.

Bringing fresh eyes is difficult when so many people grew up watching the film. That includes Maddie Shea Baldwin, who stars as Maria Rainier, the young woman who leaves an abbey in Austria to become a governess for the seven children of the widowed Navy Capt. Georg von Trapp. She ends up falling in love with the captain, defying the Nazis and escaping their homeland for freedom.

"I grew up watching the movie," Baldwin said. "But from day one, we had a director and team saying 'Let's read these lines like they're the first time they've ever been spoken.' That gives you such freedom as an actor to approach it in a way that means something to you, and then working with other actors doing the same thing."

Baldwin, who made her Broadway debut in 2016 in the Steven Martin-Edie Brickell musical "Bright Star" (which Rhodes choreographed), has a far stronger connection to the show's legacy than her co-star Tally Sessions, who said he had never seen the film "until the day I got to Florida. This was not part of my growing up at all." That is, until he suddenly recalled playing a small role in a summer stock production. "It must not have a great impact on me because I'd almost forgotten that I'd done it."

Even so, he knows that it's hard to get around the fact that the film "is such a part of our entertainment cultural fabric. You're just doomed to fail if you're trying to replicate someone else's performance."

The Asolo Rep version is a combination of the original Broadway show with the addition of two songs Rodgers wrote after Hammerstein's death on his own, specifically for the film — "Something Good" and "I Have Confidence." Rhodes said he couldn't imagine not including them.

"My inner 10-year-old — oh, who am I kidding, my inner 5-year-old — loves 'I Have Confidence.' We had to use it. I think it's a great song. And I think 'Something Good' is

one of the most beautiful love songs. They're not dewey-eyed dopes. These are two adults really looking at each other."

That love song replaces the stage version's "An Ordinary Couple."

The production also uses two songs with a bit more bite that are often dropped from stage productions because they weren't featured in the film. "How Can Love Survive" — about two people trapped in love by their wealth — was originally sung by the Captain, his fiancée the Baroness Elsa Schrader and the concert promoter Max Detweiler. (It has more recently been performed as a duet between Elsa and Max.)

"No Way to Stop It" is performed by the same trio, singing about bending to the Nazis who are coming to power in Austria. "I will not bow my head to the men I despise," the Captain declares. To which Max replies, "You don't have to bow your head, just stoop a little."

"The politics just peek their head into the show very lightly," Rhodes said. "That's how it creeps up on you. They're suddenly inside your home. Your friends have turned against you. The more we embrace the themes and ideas, the more it feels like a story worth telling."

Sessions said the changing political winds in the show "are very insidious. They work their way into your lives. Then you're saying, no, this is how you're going to live your life. They completely excise the concept of freedom out of your life. That's what dictatorships do, bully you. Take your choice away. It's an interesting dilemma."

The heart of the story is the relationship that Maria builds with the captain's seven children, who range in age from 5-year-old Gretl to 16-year-old Liesl. Under Maria's tutelage, they learn to perform together and become the von Trapp Family Singers.

The children are played by Sophie Lee Morris as Liesl, Judah Immanuel as Friedrich, Raina Lynn Khatami as Louisa, Tyler Gevas as Kurt, Sophia Cavalluzzi as Brigitta, Allie McLaughlin as Marta, and Cora Jane Messer as Gretl. All the children, aside from Morris (a professional actress from New York), are from the Sarasota area.

The production also features Liz McCartney as the Mother Abbess, Kate Loprest as Elsa, Darren Matthias as Max, Ann Morrison as the housekeeper Frau Schmidt and Cole Doman as Rolf.

Music director Jordon Cunningham will lead a 10-piece orchestra of musicians playing acoustic instruments.

“We’re not trying to sound like we’re more than 10 people. It will feel slightly more intimate than the movie orchestrations,” he said. “There’s something about having acoustic instruments that vibrate in the air differently than electronic instruments through a speaker system. It touches people in a different way.”

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## ARTS & CULTURE

### [Theatre] Fear and Kindness in "Sound of Music"



ANDREW FABIAN

When "The Sound of Music" premiered on Broadway in 1959, it did so to audiences still shaking off the trauma of a second major war. The alarming rise of the Nazi party in Europe left many reeling and wondering if the same could happen anywhere. For Josh Rhodes, director and choreographer of the Asolo's "The Sound of Music" production, the play's iconic music often overshadows the theme of fear so central to the musical's meaning, and in this theme, he saw an opportunity to frame the story's tension as a battle between doing what's right and doing what's easy.

"I think the original writers of the musical really captured the danger of neutrality," says Rhodes. The von Trapp family of Austria is affluent and somewhat removed from the graver grotesqueries of Germany's fascist fire until the Anschluss, when Germany forcibly annexed Austria back into its empire. The patriarch of the family, who opposes

Nazi ideology, seems skeptical the regime can succeed, and this skepticism eventually forces his family to make a hasty escape or risk being thrown into Hitler's war machine. "I was inspired by this lesson in the script," says Rhodes, "and how you can't hide behind walls." And the Asolo's in-house set designers gave Rhodes a chance to capture this lesson

In collaboration with the Asolo's set designers, Rhodes was able to create scenes in which the character's "are sort of boxed in," he says. This serves to simultaneously shield them from the outside world and give viewers a sense that the von Trapps cannot fully understand the gravity of the looming war. This will also give the Asolo's production a freshly conceived look that will still feel familiar to longtime fans of the musical. And when producing a musical that is such a pillar in theatre, director's like Rhodes are faced with the daunting task of honoring its original timelessness while still finding something new to say. But Rhodes felt the time was appropriate for the play's theme of fear to take a prominent role. "There's a certain harshness in our society right now," he says, "and I think the play asks us to soften our hearts and be kind."

The production opens next week at the Asolo Repertory Theatre on Wednesday November 13th and stars Maddie Shea Baldwin as Maria.

**Pictured: Maddie Shea Baldwin poses as Maria with the von Trapp children. Photo by John Revisky**