

Miss You Like Hell: Erin McKeown discusses her RI premiere



Erin McKeown; photo credit: Jo Chattman

The Wilbury Theatre Group continues its groundbreaking 2019/20 Main Series season with a Rhode Island premiere. From Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes (*In The Heights*) and folk-rock star Erin McKeown comes *Miss You Like Hell*, running March 5 -29. An intimate story of parenthood, immigration politics, and a classic road trip scenario, *Miss You Like Hell* tells the tale of Beatriz, facing imminent deportation to Mexico, and her attempt to reconnect with her estranged teenage daughter, Olivia, while encountering an eclectic group of characters on their way to the west coast. The show opened Off-Broadway at The Public Theater in 2018 and was nominated for three Outer Critics Circle Awards (Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, Best Score), five Drama Desk Awards (including Best Music, Best Lyrics, Best Orchestrations), and named Best Musical of 2018 by The Wall Street Journal.

Now playing at Wilbury, directed by Don Mays (*Hype Man: a break-beat play*) and musical direction by Matt Requentina (*Spring Awakening*, *Pirates of Penzance*), *Miss You Like Hell* has a closer Rhode Island connection based largely on the geography of its composer and lyricist, Erin McKeown. Over the last 20 years, she has performed around the world, released 10 full-length albums, and had her work placed in numerous television shows and films. A graduate of Brown University, McKeown was also a resident artist at AS220 and is currently back in Providence as the 2020 Professor of the Practice at Brown.

Motif caught up with her this week on the eve of the opening of the genre-defying *Miss You Like Hell* and discussed theater, collaboration and her secret guilty pleasure.

Motif: *Miss You Like Hell* seems to be enjoying many successful runs across the country — I see them listed on your tour date schedule. How are the various productions being coordinated? I see listings for Missouri and California among others. Are you making appearances at all of these, like you are with Wilbury?

Erin McKeown: There's no real coordination; [these theaters] just chose to produce it and I like to list them on my website for visibility. Anyone can do the show if they want to. The rights became available in 2019...so, about year in from when it all started. Whenever possible, though, I try to do a local concert in the area while the show is still open. Best case scenario, I'm able to perform at the theater itself. I'll be performing locally at The Goodwill Engine Company (*formally Firehouse 13*) on March 14 and at Brown on the 16th (*McKeown will also be giving a talkback after the play's performance at Wilbury on the 13th*).

Motif: The show gains a lot of notice simply because of the collaboration between a more traditional playwright, Quiara Alegría Hudes, and a "rock star." Do you find that to be unique?

EM: *Miss You* is unique in a number of ways because I'm not primarily a piano player, I'm a guitar player and you don't normally see scores written that are not piano-based. There are a few out there...Roseanne Cash is working on one, and of course there's Duncan Sheik, but a woman playing guitar within the musical theater construct is definitely unique.

Motif: And now you have another play in the works. Tell us about *Terrarium Behaviour*.

EM: Yes...well, during the Terrifying Boredom that is technical rehearsals, during *Miss You*, I came up with this singular image and took it as a personal challenge to write a musical around that image. I've been working on the book and the music and lyrics in between things for two or three years and now I'm looking for collaborators. I'm looking at this notion of a utopian world where anyone can be any gender. Then an individual comes along who upsets that ecology. It's sort of sci-fi with vaudeville songs — so, basically a Venn diagram of my sweet spots!

Motif: Have you always had a connection with theater?

EM: Just as a fan, as a hobby. I grew up in a small town where there wasn't a lot to do but there was community theater, and a small college that did crazy plays. I look back on seeing things like *Cloud Nine* (by the incongruous, revolutionary playwright Caryl Churchill) and can't believe that happened. So, I've always been a fan...whenever I had a day off, I would go see some theater.

Motif: So, with no formal connection to the theater world, how did you get involved working with Quiara Alegría Hudes?

EM: It happened because of my 2009 album, *Hundreds of Lions*. She heard the record and thought it sounded like something she wanted to work with. And then she just cold emailed me, one of the most important emails I've ever received ("*Lions*" is a dizzying blend of acoustic, electronic, and orchestral elements that marks a seminal moment in McKeown's recording career).

Motif: You live in Western Mass now, but the connection to Brown and Rhode Island is strong. What

brought you to Brown from Virginia?

EM: Well, I was hungry to go far away from my roots when I was thinking of colleges and a student a little older than me got recruited to Brown for soccer. And they were athletic and artistic and a free thinker, so that seemed like a thing to do. I thought Brown would be a place for people like that (laughs). So, that's how I ended up in Rhode Island. And then I lived at AS220 as a resident artist and that was just a wonderful experience. I've always kept a foot in at Brown and AS220. In fall of 2018 I did a concert for the Master Class initiative and then was asked to be Professor of Practice for 2020.

Motif: And what got you connected with Wilbury?

EM: Just a synergy of events. Wilbury chose the show. There are productions at all levels — community theater, student, and professional. This just happens to be one of those.

Motif: What's your favorite play?

EM: Oh, god. It sounds embarrassing, but I'd have to say *Guys and Dolls*. I first saw it in high school at 13 or 14. It's...troublesome today, but the music is so good. A blend of pleasure and bad politics. I talk a lot with my students about older "classic" shows that have not aged well in this climate...and I always tell them to call me "Coach", not "Professor"...because it's worth being sort of guided and advised that there can still be good music and good elements of a show that has less than ideal ingredients in it. *Miss You like Hell* exists in an interesting place...with a story of two brown women in the center of this climate and fighting for a place in the current musical theater landscape.

Motif: What has been your most unique collaborative experience as a musical artist, whether it's theater or not?

EM: Collaboration with Quiara has been singular, over the course of seven years. She's a much more accomplished playwright and I'm new but we approached this as equals, which is an incredible gift. There's music that she's been responsible for, dialogue I've been responsible for. Collaboration on lyrics opened up a whole different world, and she would feel free to say, "That melody could go this way." It's wonderful.

I have a number of musicians that have been important to me. David Chalfant, who produced "Distillation" (*her first studio album from 2000*) ...that was an incredibly important collaboration. Singular both in length and the generosity we were able to show each other.

Motif: Who do you listen to now? What entertains you?

EM: Podcasts and prestige cable. Enjoying soundtracks to TV shows I love. It makes me think, "Is that something I want to try?"

Motif: Tell us something you've never told an interviewer.

EM: (Laughs) I love to play tennis! It's a deep obsession and joy of mine.

Motif: Erin, thank you for taking the time to speak to me today. It's been an honor.

EM: Thank you, it was a pleasure. I'll see you at the show, hopefully!

Wilbury Theatre Group presents the RI Premiere of Miss You Like Hell, book & lyrics by Quiara Alegría Hudes, music & lyrics by Erin McKeown, directed by Don Mays, music direction by Matt Requentina. Mar 5 - 29, 40 Sonoma Court, PVD. For tickets and more info visit thewilburygroup.org and erinmckeown.com. There will be a talkback with Erin McKeown and members of the cast and creative team, Fri, Mar 13 post-performance.