

Bradley Gibson is Ready to "Go the Distance" as Hercules

Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. Bradley Gibson has some big sandals to fill as the titular role in "Disney's Hercules" premiering at Paper Mill Playhouse February 16th. But if anyone's ready to play the lovable demigod, it's him. As a child, Bradley was a huge fan of the 1997 animated Disney movie, and taking on the character has helped him find new meaning in and love for the story. You may know Bradley Gibson from the Broadway productions of "Rocky" and "A Bronx Tale," Netflix's series "The Partner Track," Hulu's "Fire Island," or his run as another Disney protagonist, Simba, in Broadway's "The Lion King."

We chatted about our love for the 1997 film, developing a well-known animated character for the stage, and what it feels like to star in a Disney production. Take a listen.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

Bradley, it's so nice to meet you. Thank you for taking the time. I know you guys are in the thick of rehearsals right now, so I really appreciate it.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Oh, thank you for having me. Happy to talk all things Hercules.

MADDIE ORTON:

Me too. I've been singing "Zero to Hero" all morning and I like...









BRADLEY GIBSON:

<laugh>.

MADDIE ORTON:

...can't get it out of my head. So you're playing a character who was so huge when, when you and I were kids. What was your relationship to "Disney's Hercules" before this production?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

You know, "Hercules" is the first movie, the first film that I was, I was around six, seven years old when it came out. So I was at that perfect age where it was my movie, you know? I remember going to the movie theater with my mom. I remember being obsessed with it, having coloring books and toys and a birthday cake. And I think I had like a pillow in my room. And the first year the VHS came out, I had to get it. I was one of those kids that had to have the Disney VHSs the day it was released from the vault or whatever they called it on those commercials.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, yes. Sure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Right. So it was very important to me and it was very, um, important because it was the first time, too, I saw people of color in an animated Disney film. Right. Those Muses looked like my mom and my aunties and, and it felt so familiar that music, that sort of Gospel-esque score by Alan Menken and David Zippel. So the movie was really, really important to me and I always, you know, looked at it as one of my favorite Disney movies.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, that's so cool to hear that you're a fan going in.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah, a huge fan going in. Huge fan going in. And I think for the longest time, you know, for the past year, we've been doing readings, and workshops, and whatnot of the, of the show. And because you









work on it in that sort of isolated workspace and everyone loves it, of course, but you're working on it and you really forget about what the public feels about it.

It wasn't until recently, a few months ago, I sang "Go the Distance" at a a conference in Las Vegas for 2000 people. And it was my first time singing for the public and not for Disney people or cast members castmates. And everyone was either screaming, or crying, out of their chairs, and I realized, I was like, 'Oh, wow, people love this show besides me. People love this song too, besides me.' So yeah, it's one of my favorites.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, it's such a fantastic score. So did you--for anybody who doesn't know, "Hercules" was performed, sort of this initial stage version was done in 2019 in Central Park with the Public Theater's production through their Public Works program. Did you get to see that production at all?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

I did actually, because I was in "Lion King" at the time and I injured my hand, so I was out of the show for about a month and a half. Oh. And during that time, "Hercules" was in performances and I got a chance to see it, and I loved it there too. You know, it was also a very different production. It was one act, it was a cast of 200 people and that range in ages from small children to, you know, people in their eighties. And it was a mix of community members of New York City and also professional actors. But still that, you know, that score and that story still rang true and still hits your heartstrings. And yeah, I loved it there as well. I saw the show and it was great.

MADDIE ORTON:

So I also got to see the show. I was, um, I was six months pregnant. I saw it with one of my best friends, and I don't know if this is because I was six months pregnant or because the show is just so amazing, but I just cried my face off <laugh>.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah, I'm sure.

MADDIE ORTON:

For like--the show ended, and then I cried for like another 10 minutes. I just loved it so much.









BRADLEY GIBSON:

I'm sure, I'm sure. It's one of those stories that I think--you know, what Disney does best is that we can all find ourselves in the stories or find people that we love, or moments that really were either hard or happy, memorable moments that we see, we see our own stories in, within these stories that I think now, you know, "Hercules," "Beauty and the Beast," the list goes on and on. These Disney films are kind of like, you know, American folk tales, you know, that are stories of hope and, and possibility and— Yeah, I understand why you ran tears because I get so choked up every day in rehearsal and tech. I'm actually grateful for the rehearsal process and the tech process because it allows me to have time with it where I'm not going to be, you know, a waterhead in the moment, because I have to tell the story! It's not going to really work if I'm a crying mess. <laugh>, I need you to cry <laugh>, not me.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh, I love that. Yeah. You know, it's funny, it's also one of those shows where, because it's a film that's, you know, from the mid-nineties, I, I think, you know, I maybe put it away for a while and hadn't listened to that score in such a long time. And then picking it up, it was just this flood of like, this score is amazing, and this show is so great, and it's funny, and it's smart. And it was like the nostalgia piece plus coming back as an adult and appreciating it with totally new eyes.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah, absolutely. That score, it's classic. Those Disney scores are classic. I think there's something--I don't know what Mr. Menken has in his mind, but he is brilliant. Right. Being able to really--it's classic, it never goes out of style. It always brings back that nostalgia. It's able to hook in young people, but also any age we can all be entertained by it. We all can hear the message within it. He allows there to always be a message, but it's never, it's never overdone and it's never really like thrown in your face so hard that it's too much. It's, it's amazing. And that "Hercules" score is, it's brilliant.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

So you're bringing this beloved animated character to life. Are you pulling from the film for inspiration, or do you just start completely fresh? Uh, how does that work?

BRADLEY GIBSON:









You know, I, there are elements of the film, but I--when I first started working on it, I, of course went back to the film to watch it as an adult, right? I haven't really, like you, I didn't really watch it in, in my young adult years, college, even like late high school. I hadn't really seen it in a very long time. Um, but like you, I watched it and I was like, filled with nostalgia and there, there's such great story there, but also there's such great comedy. Mm. What makes Hercules so great is there's such great comedy in this, this young man who is just <laugh>, I said in rehearsal one day to our director, Lear, he just is doing too much, you know <laugh>? He's doing too much. And that's, and the worst combination is being overly strong and doing too much. That's like a recipe for a disaster, right?

So there's great comedy in there, you know, lifting something and, you know, you break down a building because you just coughed or you just slightly lifted up a pillar or something. So I definitely watched the movie and wanted to pull some of that comedy and it's physical. Right? I think, um, and I felt that that was really important to incorporate. And just kind of trying to always incorporate--there's a beautiful, youthful essence that Hercules has. Yeah. I think the reason why we can really tap into him and kind of go on that adventure with him is because yes, he becomes a hero. Yes, he is strong. Yes, he's supposed to have muscles and whatnot, but also there's this beautiful childlike, youthful essence to him that makes you just want the world for him, makes you root for him. It makes you feel for him. And I wanted to make sure that that was there.

Um, so I, I definitely think, I'm sure that other people in the show as well, other cast members also looked at the film because like I said before, these films are classics and people have such nostalgia when they see them that I think that it would be a huge disservice if you didn't look at the film as great reference, because it is so great.

MADDIE ORTON:

Sure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Um, but also with that being said, our, our show is very different from the film because we get to really get in there and find that nuance in spaces that doesn't happen in the 90-minute cartoon, you know? <laugh> And there're themes within the show that are very, you know, there are very adult themes about life and about what happens in, in the sad spaces of life to get to the joyous spaces. What it means to go through, you know, hard times or go through heartbreak or go through not feeling like you belong somewhere. Those are really adult things that are really mature about, you know, about the world and about life and about growing up.









So I think that I also didn't really have to look at the film because at this point in my life, I also have felt like Hercules, right? I've also had adversity. I've also dealt with, you know, not feeling like I belong, not feeling like I'm, I'm in a space that that is safe. Not feeling like people see me, right? Something we found one day in rehearsal as we were sitting there talking about the script and really doing table work, doing that stuff, that I as an actor love so much. I love to sit there with my castmates and the director and the writers. I'm just talk about this script. We talked about this script as if it were, you know, Shakespeare. And that's what doing theater is, right? It's sitting there and dissecting it. And what we said one day we found is that 'Oh wow, Hercules and all of these characters--the good ones, the bad ones--they are all just wanting to be seen.'

MADDIE ORTON:

Hmm. That's interesting.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

They're all just wanting to be seen. They're all just wanting to be accepted. And that is so human and that is so real for I'm sure for any single person that's going to be sitting in the audience watching the show. So, um, absolutely I drew from the film, but also I drew from just that great book that Robert Horn and Kwame Kwei-Armah wrote and had been working on for the past couple of years.

MADDIE ORTON:

And it's also, I mean, it is, it is a story of a Greek god that has maintained for generations and generations. And there's a reason for that, I'm sure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

MADDIE ORTON:

So when you are in the character of Hercules, obviously I think there is that super important character work of how you're coming into that place, because there is such a--it's both a very human story, but also it is a story of a demigod, I guess.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah. Yeah.









MADDIE ORTON:

Or god?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Demigod trying to get to the "god" singular place <laugh>.

MADDIE ORTON:

Right. But then the other piece of it is, you as an actor, you, I'm sure your physicality has to change a little bit because you know that if you touch a vase it can crack in your hand, right?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah. The physicality is really important. And I'm an actor, no matter what I'm playing, I always kind of work from the outside in. Right. I think it's so important to, to feel like what you're playing, whether it be how I physically look or what I'm wearing, or how that character walks in the world, how they take up space. And for Hercules, you know, he is this young man, I would call him a young man, but I would sometimes say a young boy, right? He's on that cusp of like 18, 19 kind of years old, ready to leave the nest. And he's incredibly strong, but has never been praised for that strength. He's only been made by most people in the world to feel incredibly small and to feel incredibly unworthy. So that means that there's like an element of like being within yourself, right? Or, or also he's so open-hearted and so joyous and just looking at the world. It's so incredible to play someone who just looks at the world in the way of 'Wow, everyone hates me. Everyone thinks I'm not enough, but I, all I know to do is just give them my heart and just to give them my kindness, to give them my joy. And if I do that, they're gonna, they're gonna love me.'

And to have someone constantly keep, you know, punching you down on that, that wears on you. But also he is, like I said, so joyous and so young and effervescent and sees the bright side of life. So, you know, he's that person who walks through the world like, you know, like he just got a new job, <laugh> <laugh>, you know, kinda energy? Matched with his childlike innocence, matched with his strengths. So yeah, the physicality is so important. And also showing the audience, showing the audience what it looks like to kind of be overly developed in that way. Right? Like what it means to touch a vase and it breaks what it means to be able to lift a pound of rubble or a huge bag of, of rocks <laugh>. What does that look like to do that? Yeah. Physicality is so important, especially in theater where you're performing for a, a huge house of people. So yeah, physicality is huge for Hercules.









MADDIE ORTON:

And the sight gags there I'm sure are a blast.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Oh, it's a blast. I was telling our director, Lear, the other day, I was like, you know, I'm living my Carol Burnett fantasy <laugh>. There are moments--my Lucille Ball fantasy, you know what I mean? Physical comedy and comedy is hard. Right. You know, comedy is more difficult than great drama. So getting it right and getting it all the beats. Correct. I'm still working on that and finding that because I want it to really ring true and be funny. But man, the physical comedy in the show is so cool. They've built some really, really cool things. <laugh>, it's so fun. It's so fun.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

The cast is ridiculous.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Mm-hmm.

MADDIE ORTON:

Um, yourself of course. And then also Schuler Hensley, who I, uh, I just saw a Music Man on Broadway plays, uh, Hercules' nemesis Hades.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yep.

MADDIE ORTON:

James Monroe Iglehart, who won the Tony for Genie in Aladdin on Broadway, and then obviously more recently in Hamilton, is Phil, the wisecracking coach who is a...what is Phil?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

He in the movie, he is a half-goat, half...I can call him a satyr, right? Would you say?









MADDIE ORTON:

Okay. <laugh>.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

But in this version, he is not that. In this version, he is not that, he is not that at all. So, um, I think people were really, really surprised how, you know, because we're taking it out of the context of the cartoon, you get to give more life to these characters.

MADDIE ORTON:

Sure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

And James is also brilliant. He is brilliant. He is so, so good. I understand why I feel like he's the most loved man on Broadway because you get into a room with him and you cannot help but fall in love with him. You cannot help but feel supported by him. Um, so what he's bringing to Phil is just, it is life. So you're going get to see a whole--this, this is not the Phil from the cartoon, but if you love the cartoon, there's also colors and flavors that's still there. But, um, yeah.

MADDIE ORTON:

That's fantastic. I mean, that must be such a great group of people to work with every day.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

It's the best. And like you were saying, Schuler. Schuler is also brilliant. Schuler and James are both Tony Award-winning actors. So, you know, I keep saying, I'm like, I'm, we are working with the best of the best here. Like, we all are bringing our A game. Those two men are great. Izzy who plays Meg, is phenomenal. Every single female who is those of those Muses, they are just, they will knock you out with their talent—their beauty, their voices. Yeah, the cast is prime. Prime, A-list casting, and I'm just trying to, to match their quality, because I'm like, 'Wow.' I sit back and watch them. I'm like, 'Let me bring my A game because everybody up in here is the best.'

MADDIE ORTON:









Oh, that's so great. And then also, of course, Alan Menken's music. I mean, is he--have you gotten to meet and work with Alan Menken directly?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yes. And actually, I did "A Bronx Tale" the Musical with Alan Menken. He did that score with Glenn Slater. So that was when I first got to meet in person and work with Alan Menken for that show.

MADDIE ORTON:

That's right.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

And then, um, for "Hercules," yeah. Like I said, we've been doing labs and readings and whatnot for almost a, for almost a year now before we got into rehearsals for this production. So Alan's been a part of the process. And it's always so cool to get the chance to see Alan Menken, David Zippel, these icons of theater, of contemporary music at work. You know, not just sitting there and watching, but there are moments when I got to witness Alan Menken at the piano, right? Like having ideas and talking to his team about how to arrange something. And that's--Alan Menken is a genius.

MADDIE ORTON:

Yeah. That to me is like, speaking of like Hercules being a demigod, I mean, in my world, Alan Menken is a demigod <laugh>. Like, I can't even imagine.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

I agree. I agree. I was telling, um, my husband and I were with dinner with friends the other day and I made a joke. I was like, 'I dare anyone to say that the Alan Menken repertoire isn't good. Like, try it. You can't! That's not possible. That's not possible. There's, you have to find one song that you connect with that is your favorite. There is one song that makes you cry. There is one song that brings back a flood of nostalgia from your childhood or, or your child's childhood, you know?' And at this point now, it's different generations that are experiencing Alan Menken music, right?

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh yeah! Sure.









BRADLEY GIBSON:

You have parents, parents of parents. It's, it's so cool. It's, yeah, Alan is a genius.

MADDIE ORTON:

It also just like for, for Alan Menken, he has a show at Paper Mill, he has "Little Shop" off-Broadway. He just had "Beauty and the Beast Live" on ABC. Like he is just--his music is everywhere and it is so entrenched in our culture. And I just, I mean, it just, I can't even imagine working with him.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Yeah. I have told him multiple times that Alan Menken <laugh> has had a, had a big hand in raising me. Right. I, I remember <laugh>. I know there were so many moments. I remember so many moments as a little kid where, you know, how would you get Bradley to be quiet for a little while? Pop in Beauty and the Beast, pop in "Aladdin," pop in "Hercules" in the VHS, and like, give, give mom, give Grandma a second to... <laugh>, give her a break <laugh>!

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON:

And this is not your first Disney musical, um, the same as it's not, it's not James Monroe Igelhart's either. You were Simba in "Lion King" on Broadway.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

l was.

MADDIE ORTON:

What is that experience like? I just assume that a Disney musical experience must be just a little bit different than any other Broadway show.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Absolutely. You know, "The Lion King" was my first Broadway show. I saw it in high school with my, um, choir on a field trip to New York City. And because I'm, I'm from North Carolina, it's a really small town raised by my grandmother in a single parent home, Broadway was not accessible to me. Right? It wasn't, we weren't coming to New York a lot. I had seen a couple of tours, but "Lion King" was my first









Broadway show. And that is huge for me personally. Right? Seeing a stage full of Black and Brown people, seeing a young man on stage playing Simba that looks like me. It opened my mind to the possibility that maybe I could do that too. And how to like, make sense of that. So to then, many years later, to be one of the Simbas in that long line of great men that have played Simba, it, it is different.

And it, you know, just re replacing in a Broadway show was one thing, but I think replacing in "The Lion King," in a Disney show, was different—a whole other thing--because, you know, you know that so many people that are coming into that theater, it's their first experience with a Broadway show.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh sure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Maybe it's their first experience with theater, right? And "The Lion King" is a staple, one of the shows that if you come to New York as a tourist, you're probably going to see one of a few shows, and one of those shows at the top of that list is "The Lion King". And, um, yeah, it was really special. It was really, really eye-opening for me. Just as it was sitting in the audience, it was eye-opening to stand on the stage and sing a "Hakuna Matata", to sing "Endless Night", "Can you feel the love tonight?"

It was a big moment for me to also kind of just--it was my first lead role on Broadway. I had played principal roles before, in "A Bronx Tale" I played a supporting Principal role. But, you know, Simba is a whole other thing. Right? And it really was eye-opening for me to just-- I started doing it when I was around 27. And I remember standing on stage one day and kind of thinking, 'Wow, I think it's time to keep dreaming bigger.' Right?

MADDIE ORTON: Wow. Yeah.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Like, let's keep dreaming bigger. And I think that's just a testament, too, of that quote unquote "Disney magic," right? I think one of the goals is to make you dream bigger and to, and to hope and dream for the impossible.

I'm grateful for "The Lion King." I'm grateful that it, it also showed me, um, the beauty of, of theater family. Right? Being in a show that is so long-running. There are people in that building that have been there some since the very beginning, 20-some years ago.









MADDIE ORTON: Wow.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Right? So you have, uh, a company of, of actors, and crew members, stage management, wardrobe that have been there for so long, therefore they have--they are chosen family in a way. They've experienced birth, and death, and the, you know, incredible highs and lows and holidays. And that was beautiful to experience in a show that is so—"The Lion King," it just, it feels different because people from the audience from all over the world, and they all sure feel so attached to that story, that story about life, about understanding the circle of life, how it, it starts, how it ends. It is so powerful, and um, I truly look at it as one of the great honors of my life because as I've been here in New York for a while now, I've gotten to know and love so many of the men that played Simba and Mufasa before me.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh wow.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

So to just be in that list now, it, that blows my mind. I was at the, um, anniversary performance of "The Lion King" a few months ago, and at the end of the show, they did this beautiful performance where they brought out every actor that has played Young Simba and Young Nala since the beginning of the show. And they all wore, um, like caps and gowns like they were graduating, and they sang this beautiful song from the show, and they had like a, a sort of like a film that came down on the screen.

MADDIE ORTON:

Oh wow.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

And to look at all of those people that are now, you know, some are my age, and some are very, very young, to have all come through that show, all of these Black and Brown young women and young menit's just, "The Lion King" is a special, special, special show.

MADDIE ORTON:









Oh, I love that so much. I guess a show like "Hercules," the thought is that that could also maybe move to Broadway? Is that a conversation that people are having?

BRADLEY GIBSON:

You know, I know people are talking about it in the world, right? I think people want it.

MADDIE ORTON:

People are talking about it on this podcast right now!

BRADLEY GIBSON:

On this podcast right now, people are talking about it! And you know, would I love to see that? Yes. But I have not heard anything about that. I know that we are doing a show at Paper Mill, and people must get their tickets. They must get their tickets because I keep telling friends and family, I'm like, 'Y'all, I keep warning y'all. Every day I go to rehearsal and hear these people singing and acting. I've seen the set. I've seen the amazing costumes. You do not want to miss it. And if you do miss it, you're going to be mad. You're going to be upset.' <laugh>.

MADDIE ORTON:

Well, we don't want anybody to be upset. So, everybody go see "Hercules" at Paper Mill. Bradley, thank you so much for your time. It was such a pleasure.

BRADLEY GIBSON:

Oh my gosh, thank you for having me. What a joy.

MADDIE ORTON:

Disney's "Hercules" runs from February 16th through March 19th at Paper Mill Playhouse. For more information, visit papermill.org.

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