



## The Lightning Thief on The Growing Stage Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast.

“When teenager Percy Jackson discovers he's a demigod, he and his friends embark on an epic journey to find Zeus's missing lightning bolt and prevent a war among the gods.”

That is the synopsis for “The Lightning Thief - the Percy Jackson Musical,” produced by The Growing Stage, the Children's Theater of New Jersey in Netcong, running March 10th through 26th.

The Growing Stage's mission is to nurture the development of the performing arts through education and to create, produce, and perform works that engage the entire family. Based on the novel by Rick Riordan, with a book by Joe Tracz and music and lyrics by Rob Rokicki, this rock musical is theater for the whole family to enjoy.

Today I spoke with ‘The Lightning Thief’ vocal coach, Melinda Bass O'Neill and actress Jeorgi Smith as they prepare to launch this production by The Growing Stage.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

How about we start with, uh, you ladies introducing yourselves, um, and we can start with, with Jeorgi to make it easy. You're playing Annabeth in the show, right?

JEORGI SMITH:

Yes. Hi! My name is Jeorgi Smith and I will be playing Annabeth in “The Lightning Thief” at The Growing Stage.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Awesome. Can you tell us a little bit about your character and, and just about the show itself?



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JEORGI SMITH:

Sure. Um, so the Percy Jackson Musical, “The Lightning Thief,” is the story about Percy Jackson who discovers that he is a demi god, um, and he doesn't know who his father is. And then when he arrives at Camp Half Blood, he finally figures out who his father is, which I won't tell you because that will be spoiling the secret of the show. And, uh, he ends up going on an adventure to do this killer quest. Uh, and that's our musical. And I am playing Annabeth who, um, is a camper at Camp Half Blood. Um, and she is the daughter of Athena.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Daughter of Athena. Ugh, she was always one of my favorite goddesses. I don't know why. I just chose her to be my favorite and she has been ever since I was a child.

JEORGI SMITH:

<laugh>. Aw, she's cool.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Right? Um, so that sounds like a really exciting role. Melinda, can you tell us a little bit about, uh, what you do with the show and with The Growing Stage?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah. So my name is Melinda Bass. Now Melinda Bass O'Neil. Um, so I started at The Growing Stage when I was about nine. I did my first show there and I worked there as an actor, as a camp music teacher, as a music director. And this is the first time I think The Growing Stage has had a vocal coach. So, um, it just kind of happened. Like Laura Petrie is the musical director and I've been friends with Rob Rokicki who wrote the music for “The Lightning Thief” for about 20 years now. So they just kind of asked if I wanted to be involved and help out cause I, I know the style that Rob writes and is a little different than your typical Growing Stage show. It's, it's more of a rock opera. So I'm just there to kind of help and lend moral support and help with any vocal issues 'cause it is very challenging to sing. So, so far all we've done is learn the music 'cause it's a lot of music to learn. But hopefully within the next two weeks I'll be able to pull people out and work with them on their solos and just make sure they can sing healthy. 'Cause it is a challenging show to sing. And I think you guys have like seven 10 AM performances <laugh> where you have to belt.

JEORGI SMITH:

It's exciting.



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MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah. So, so yeah, that's what I'm there for.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

As a non-singer. I always find this fascinating. Uh, I now I've gotten into watching vocal coaches on TikTok. There's a lot of that, but I'm so fascinated by what it is that you do. Um, and I'd love to talk a little bit more about that. And also, you are also a music therapist. Am I -

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Um, and I'd love to talk a little bit more about that. And also, you are also a music therapist. Am I -

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

I am.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I'm - - I would love to hear more about that.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah, sure. So, um, so my undergrad is actually a musical theater. So I did the whole acting/ performing thing. And then once I reached a certain age, I was like, "Hey, I wanna have a kid, so what else can I do? But I can't give up music. Like that's the thing I really wanna do." So I was thinking about music education and then I kind of found out more about music therapy. So I went back for my masters. So I work with kids and adults with like intellectual disabilities and autistic, um, people and a variety of abilities. I have some deaf students, I have some blind students, I have students with-- who are medically fragile. So it's really a way to, it's not so much teaching music, it's more of a way of using music to work on goals. So let's say I have a little preschooler who's still not speaking, we'll use music to get them to say a word or just to vocalize. Or if I have a person in a wheelchair who really can't move, it's anything- just lifting their head for the day is their goal. Or, you know, self-expression, all sorts of things. Think about like OT, like occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, all used with music as like the, the tool to reach those goals and needs.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I think that's really important work and I love that. I'm, I'm wondering has that informed the way you

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approach your vocal coaching at all? Has it changed? Um, has it changed your approach when working with, uh, the cast of, of 'The Lightning Thief?'

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

<laugh> It's definitely a different way of singing. I obviously don't like project as much when I'm doing music therapy. I use like more different levels of my voice, but finding that is helping me encourage other people, you know, the actors to find different levels. You don't always have to belt everything out or push everything out, just find different levels of your voice and just vocal health. Cuz I'll sing like five or six hours a day, which is more than I sang when I was performing. So I've definitely learned how to like, manage my voice better and just take care of it better.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Have the two of you worked together, um, in the coaching regard yet?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Not so much yet, but I did music direct Jeorgi in "Young Frankenstein" what-

JEORGI SMITH:

Yes!

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Six years ago?

JEORGI SMITH:

A while ago. A while ago. And it was, it was a lot of fun. We had a great time on that production <laugh>.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah. So I coached you a little bit then, but I was the official music director then, so

JEORGI SMITH:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm excited to get like to the next part with, with Melinda getting to, uh, be coached by her. It's really exciting.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yes, that's the goal. I'm event--, hopefully this week I'll be working with you on some of your stuff.

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JEORGI SMITH:

Woo-hoo.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Now that you know it.

JEORGI SMITH:

<laugh>

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Jeorgi, can you tell me what you're most excited about when it comes to playing Annabeth?

JEORGI SMITH:

Ooh. Well, first of all, I feel like I'm a little geek when it comes to this show. I love it. Um, I first like found the soundtrack and then, um, and then when I got the script and started memorizing my lines, I actually read the book while I was memorizing. Um, because I'm just, I'm in love with it. And I think that's why the show does so well too, is because people love this story. I mean, this, it's a huge book series, huge book series. Um, so that's part of why I love it. And, and Annabeth is like a hugely iconic character in, in the books. Um, so it's just an honor to get to play her, to be honest with you. She is just, she's really an icon and she's a great person for young girls to look up to. Um, she's just, she's so strong. She's smart and she knows that she's strong and she's smart and that is just such an incredible character to play.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Confidence, right? Confidence is key.

JEORGI SMITH:

Absolutely. And it's great for me too, just, it, it boosts my confidence as well, you know, getting to play such a character like that. It's, it's exciting. <laugh>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

And on that note, I mean, I think that's really important to be teaching the younger generation to, to believe in yourself, to be confident. This is a theater that specializes in, in children's theater. So what can you say about this show that will really encourage families to come together and see 'The Lightning Thief'?

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JEORGI SMITH:

Well, I definitely think everybody's going to love it. Anybody that comes to see this production is going to love it. I think, again, the music is more of a rock opera like Melinda said, so it's going to be in your minds, like when you leave, you are, you're going to fall in love with the music. Um, but I think it's also, it has an edge to it that like a lot of musical theater doesn't usually go into. So I think people will remember that as well and really enjoy seeing that.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

And the songs are so catchy, they get stuck in your head and it's just a fun story. Like, I feel like it's a great story, like iconic story to be told and to be introduced to at The Growing Stage. Probably a lot of kids will come maybe having read the book and knowing the story and then also introducing it to new kids.

JEORGI SMITH:

I know too, like teaching, uh, at The Growing Stage, it's really, it's been really fun because the kids, like in my, in my classes have been so excited for this show. They've been asking all year about it. And some of them even are asking like, oh, can I, like, can I audition that? I would be like, I dunno, <laugh>, you have to talk, you have to, you have to wait and see. Um, or talk to Steve or talk to Lori. Um, Stephen Fredericks the, um, artistic director. And, um, but I just, I know that there's already so many, so many students at The Growing Stage that are excited to see this because they've read it in school or they've read it on their own or they're reading it currently.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

My daughter asked- she wanted to be in it, and Jeorgi teaches her on Saturday mornings,

JEORGI SMITH:

<laugh>

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

And she didn't understand why she couldn't audition for Percy Jackson when we couldn't find one yet. <laugh>, we were holding an audition to find Percy because it's a challenging role to sing. And she's like, I don't understand, why can't I be Percy Jackson? And then she's like, why can't Jeorgi be Percy Jackson <laugh>? I'm like, Jeorgi is Annabeth.

JEORGI SMITH:

<laugh>.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Which is a fabulous role. But that brings me to my next question. Is this a show, you're talking about these students who wanna audition. Is this a show starring children? Are there children in the show or is this more geared towards a, a child audience, a family audience?

JEORGI SMITH:

It's more geared towards, uh, a children and family audience. Um, there, there are no, um, children in the production. It's, it's six adults? Six adults.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

I think there's seven of you. Four guys and three girls.

JEORGI SMITH:

Yes. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah. And it's a little too challenging to sing for kids. It's written, it's written for adults, like 20 somethings to play. How old are you guys supposed to be like teenagers, I'm assuming, right?

JEORGI SMITH:

Yes. Um, I, in the books, in the Percy Jackson books, um, Percy Jackson is 12, Annabeth is 12. Um, but the characters range from 12 to I would say 19.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I've seen there's been movie iterations of this, obviously the, these are based on the books and there's going to be a new, uh, Disney series as well. Uh, I feel like Rick Riordan is having like a, a renaissance now. It's all about his stuff, uh, which is great and I'm looking forward to it. I am curious, is there like a, an age group that you would recommend this show to? What's too young? What's, what's a good niche age, would you say?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

I would say maybe like five or six and up. Um, I did see it on Broadway and I didn't, my daughter at the time I think was six and we didn't bring her, but the Broadway production was very loud and a little scary. I don't know, I don't think ours is gonna be quite as scary. Um, I'm not sure <laugh> because we haven't like fully staged it and I haven't seen all the costumes and everything, but there are monsters in it. Um, but I think usually The Growing Stage kind of gears things a little bit more so it's not so much like loudness and in your face.

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JEORGI SMITH:

Yeah. Like there's also lots of swords. There's, there's some sword fighting and stuff, stage combat in there too. So, um, I think Melinda is right five, six up to that, like second, first, second grade, you know, it does, it does have those themes of stage fighting in combat as well.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

I would compare it to like Harry Potter One <laugh>, however old you are when you watched that. That's kind of what I'm thinking of it. It reminds me a lot of Harry Potter in a way, especially since there's the trio with Annabeth, Grover and Percy. It's like, you know, Harry, her- Hermione and Ron. It just reminds me of Harry Potter a little bit.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

That makes sense. That's a really good comp too. And I'm sure, you know, the parents listening will, um, be able to take some of those notes and, and decide for themselves what the right age is <laugh>. But you mentioned before that, um, Melinda, I know that you were talking about how you started when you were about nine, you said with The Growing Stage, and you both had that experience growing up in the theater, really. And, and with The Growing Stage specifically, what has it been like to go from a child performer to now a professional within the same space?

JEORGI SMITH:

It's, it's so, so, so cool. And I think what's really funny too about my story is I think my first production I ever saw it, well, it was "The Wizard of Oz" at The Growing Stage, which I think was the production that Melinda starred as Dorothy in-

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

mm-hmm. <affirmative>

JEORGI SMITH:

which is even like, cooler. Um, because then I took classes there when I was a child, when I was very young, and then was in "The Wizard of Oz" myself when I was 10. And then years later after graduating from college, I was then, um, Dorothy in 2018 at the, at The Growing Stage. So it's kind of been a full circle moment. It's, it's beyond cool getting to be at your home away from home. It's amazing.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

It's kind of funny. And I have a similar story to Jeorgi. My first show that I saw, I was three and I saw Lori Fredericks play Dorothy, and then, then later I was a Munchkin, and then later I was Dorothy, and then

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we saw Jeorgi as Dorothy, and my daughter was four when she saw Dorothy, her as Dorothy. So maybe she'll be Dorothy one day. <laugh>. You neber know. It's funny that full circle.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I love this so much. I wanna know how perhaps our listeners who are just now learning about The Growing Stage, how can they become involved? What if they have kids who wanna join? Where do we direct them? How do they do this?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Well, there's the website that helps. I wanna say it's growing stage.com, I hope <laugh>. And there's you- I think there's options to volunteer. There's classes, I think if your little ones are interested in classes, it ranges from preschool all the way to high school. That's a good way to, to get them started. There's also the summer state camp over the summer, which is amazing. I was a camper then a counselor, then a teacher, and now my daughter's going to the camp. So it's just like full circle. And she loves it. Everybody's so friendly there. So, and they're always looking for volunteers. And there's definitely a way in, even if you're not a performer, you can volunteer and help make popcorn or help paint sets or whatever.

JEORGI SMITH:

Absolutely. And, and also if you are a performer, you can start auditioning there at, at 10 years old too. So, um, you just check out The Growing Stage website and check their blog page, which is where they post all the auditions. And if there's any young performers that would like to audition per show at The Growing Stage, they can check that out and see, see what's out and up and coming.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Yeah. Like this, this show is mostly adults, but they usually have at least one show a year where it's for the whole family. So ages 10 and up can audition.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

10 and up. That is so important. I really hope that there are families out there or parents out there who are listening to this and are really already on your website getting ready to, uh, sign up. I kind of wish that I were 10 again, I feel <laugh>. I would

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

You can audition as an, as an adult as well.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

<laugh>. This is true. I could still audition. I just, yeah, just me missing my youth right now. I just wanna go back in time <laugh>, but I'm really excited about this show. And, and you've mentioned that it is more rock opera. Um, would you say- I mean, you also mentioned that it might be kind of scary. Like, is this overall a happy theme? Are we going to be crying? Should we be bringing tissues to the theater? <laugh>? How do we prepare to see the show?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

It's definitely a, it's definitely a happy ending <laugh>, if that helps. Yeah. There are moments where you're a little worried for certain characters. I don't wanna give anything away.

JEORGI SMITH:

Yeah. Like I said, it, they go on an, an epic adventure. They go on a killer quest, that's what they call it in, in the musical. Um, and they sing a whole song about it, but they're going on this, on this big adventure. And, um, kind of similar, again, similar to Harry Potter in that sense that they're, they're trying to reach a goal and, and they're trying to find something and, and figure something out. It's kind of the same type of adventure. So it is happy. It is, it's exciting.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I think that's important to know. I am just the type of person who likes to walk into a show knowing whether I'm going to end up crying or, you know, tears of joy or tears of sadness. <laugh>

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

There's going to be some heartwarming moments, but I don't think you really need a tissue box. But maybe you do <laugh> if you're a little sentimental.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Maybe I, I'll probably need one.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

There's a sweet song between the mom and Percy. I, it makes me a little-

JEORGI SMITH:

That's a beautiful moment.

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MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

You know-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I'm assuming that would be a ballad. <laugh>.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> <laugh>, it's called 'Strong.' It's about being strong and, and normal is a myth— it's called, uh- there's a great line and it says "normal is a myth," right? Everybody has issues. Being different is, makes you who you are, makes you special, makes you strong.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

That's awesome.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

That's a lot of nice messages in this show.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

<laugh>. Absolutely. That's a great message. Some people really like to prep for shows by listening to the soundtrack first. Is that something that you recommend or you like to encourage people to go in- Um, you know, I don't, I don't know what you call it - cold turkey. Just like go in without any, any knowledge of the show prior.

JEORGI SMITH:

Ooh. That's a difficult question.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

As an actor or as a going to see the show for the first time?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

As a- an audience member.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

I mean, I think it's, I think it go either way. Sometimes you kind of compare to the soundtrack and you're kind of wanting that same like, performance.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
True. That could be risky.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:  
So, but, um, I have to say, everybody in this cast is pretty amazing. You might even like their performances better than the soundtrack. Who knows <laugh>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
So we'll just say instead, this is the show to see. I, I'm looking forward to it. I love musicals. That tends to be my genre. As someone who can't sing myself. I like watching other people do it for me. So that's <laugh> What I'm looking forward to.

JEORGI SMITH:  
This, this story is, it's a really special story. I mean, if you love Greek mythology, then, then you're really gonna love this. Um, it's, it's so much fun and it definitely teaches you a lot about Greek mythology too, which is cool. It definitely reminded me a lot of what I learned in middle school <laugh>. Um, it's a really, really fun story that I think a lot of people are going to have a lot of fun seeing, and they are gonna really love the music and I think they're really gonna enjoy all the actors on stage. We have such an amazing cast. It's, it's really awesome and a great production team too. So I think, um, I think that's a big thing too. The Greek mythology though is really a huge part of, of this story. So if you love it, come see it.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:  
Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
Jeorgi, what did you say that you teach at The Growing Stage?

JEORGI SMITH:  
Sure. So I teach on Saturday mornings. I teach, uh, Creative Dramatics, which is a class that explores the imagination. Um, a lot of what we do is we play a lot of games, um, a lot of listening, a lot of improv, a lot of exploring our imagination. Um, ultimately by the end of the class we take a book that we've read and we turn it into a play at the end of the class. Um, and then I also teach the Musical Theater Performance Preparation class, which is where, um, we, the goal of the classes to teach two, um, audition cuts that these students can use in the future if they ever go and audition. Um, and I teach them acting through song, we work on dance, um, they even learn choreography to these songs.

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Sometimes we create a play throughout the songs too. Um, so those are the two classes that I teach currently at The Growing Stage.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
And what age group is that?

JEORGI SMITH:  
Sure. So Creative Dramatics, um, I currently teach, uh, kindergarten K-1, um, but that goes up to second grade. And then there's, um, second all the way to I think ninth grade- there's an acting lab and I think that actually goes into high school as well. I might be wrong. <laugh>. And then Physical Theater Performance Prep class, it goes from second grade to ninth grade.

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:  
Oh. And a little plug. I'm going to be starting a preschool class I next week. I think.

JEORGI SMITH:  
How exciting!

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:  
Incorporating music as well. So it's gonna be kind of a mix between what Jeorgi does between the Creative Dramatics and the musical theater, but using music to kind of introduce theater to, to introduce the three acting cools, uh, cools – tools! <laugh> Cools! Um, your voice, your body, and your imagination. So.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
And when does that start?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:  
That is supposed to start next Saturday. It's, it's just a four week workshop, basically four Saturdays. We're trying to get the younger- 'cause so far most of the classes have been kindergarten and up. So now we're trying to get that younger preschool age in. And then the goal is to eventually get like a, a Big Person and Me class in there too.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:  
Awesome.

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MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

So we can start them really young <laugh>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Yes <laugh> Great. And all of that information should be on [growingstage.com](http://growingstage.com), right?

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Great. Awesome. Well, this has been super informative. I'm really excited about the show!

MELINDA BASS O'NEILL:

Come see the show. It's gonna be great. Get involved with The Growing Stage. You won't be disappointed. Obviously Jeorgi and I are still there. <laugh>

JEORGI SMITH:

<laugh>,

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

The Growing Stage's production of 'The Lightning Thief - The Percy Jackson Musical' runs March 10th through the 26<sup>th</sup> at the Historic Palace Theater in Netcong, New Jersey. For more information, be sure to visit [growingstage.com](http://growingstage.com). If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends a transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com).

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This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. I'd like to extend special thanks to our guests, Melinda Bass O'Neill and Jeorgi Smith.

I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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