



## Premiere Stages Launches “Satellites”

### Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

[TEASER: “Satellites”] (00:04)

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (00:32):

That was a snippet of Erin Breznitsky’s premiere play, “Satellites.”

I’m Gina Marie Rodriguez and you’re listening to the “Jersey Arts Podcast.”

“Satellites” is a show wherein married couple Katherine & Mike are each on a mission to save the world. She's a scientist studying climate change; he's an astronaut exploring the unknown. When Mike's shuttle vanishes into outer space, Katherine forges ahead alone, raising their children and continuing her life's work until Mike suddenly reappears without explanation. As the couple struggles to adjust to his strange return, they're forced to reexamine their entire relationship—while also facing an uncertain future.

On their first day of rehearsal, I was able to chat with playwright Erin Breznitsky and director John J. Wooten as they bring this play to life. We start as John explains his rehearsal process.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (01:22):

We started with some table work. So since this is a new play, it's never been produced before, we're spending the first three days at the table just kind of navigating through the, the play, each of the

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scenes. And because, um, because it's not a linear play, it, it goes from the past to the present to different times in the past. Um, we're actually gonna finish our table work, part of the rehearsal process by reading the play in chronological order. Just so that the actors can get a sense of how the journey begins from the first time they met to the last scene. Um, so it, it's also helpful, I think, uh, it's certainly helpful to me as a director and also, um, probably cause you're, you're doing some rewrites. It's probably helpful to you as well. Right?

ERIN BREZNITSKY (02:10):

It's super helpful. Yeah. It, it helps, you know, clear up any dramaturgical questions. It helps illuminate a lot of those character moments.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:17):

That's great. I think that's a really clever way of, uh, approaching it. Erin, can I ask you, is this the first time that this play is ever being produced?

ERIN BREZNITSKY (02:25):

It is, yes. It had a reading at Premiere in the play festival last spring. It had a virtual reading in October, 2020, just in a very sort of informal way. So this is the first time it's gonna be seen on its feet, um, with full production elements behind it. And, uh, I'm really excited it's gonna be up from here.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:44):

Well, that's amazing. So first I wanna say congratulations.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (02:47):

Thank you.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:48):

That is a wonderful, wonderful accomplishment. But I'd love to know about the journey itself. You know, can you tell me what is "Satellites" about and, and what was your inspiration when writing it?

ERIN BREZNITSKY (02:59):

Sure. Uh, "Satellites" follows the relationship between an astronaut and a climate scientist, um, over about 16 years of their relationship. Um, and along the way they marry, they have children, and then he goes off to space and is lost for many years, uh, and finally returns. Uh, but for him, it's only been a few months that he's been gone, but on earth he's been gone for seven years. So, the present day scenes are really about the two of them trying to navigate the different places that they are in their relationship, that she has grieved an entire person. Um, and now that person is back in front of her and he is trying to figure out, you know, how to really catch up with all the lost time that, uh, all the time that he's lost. And so that's, that's the crux of the story. And there's, there's mystery, there's romance, there's climate change, um, and a lot of, I hope, a lot of great character moments for the audience to follow.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (04:03):

Um, and as for the journey of the play, um, I had just written right before I started this piece, I had just written two plays back to back that were very big. Um, they had very large casts. They were based on historical events and had lots of double casting and big sort of set requirements. And I was really hungry to write something a little more contained. Um, although John might not agree that this is very contained, um, but I wanted to, uh, I know I wanted to write a two-hander and I knew that I wanted it to be a love story. And that's sort of where I started and really found the climate change piece along the way. And that sort of became the, um, the, the seed of the play.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:42):

Are you a big, uh, climate activist? Should I ask?

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ERIN BREZNITSKY (04:45):

Uh, I wouldn't say that I'm actively an activist. I certainly, um, believe that we need to be doing more, uh, as a society to address climate change. And I hope that this play illuminates that issue in some way.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:59):

I hope so too. It sounds wonderful. Um, I- John, this question is for you, not only are you the director of "Satellites," but you're also the producing artistic director of Premiere Stages at Kean University. So, if you don't mind, could you tell me a little bit about Premiere Stages and, and the kinds of shows that you typically like to produce there?

JOHN J. WOOTEN (05:19):

Sure, absolutely. So Premiere Stages, my background is in new play development. I'm also a playwright. So, when I founded Premiere Stages, it was important for me to afford opportunities to American playwrights to have their work developed. So, I'd say the majority of what we do is geared towards new play development, not only in the professional productions that we do, but also the educational programs that we offer. We do a lot of playwriting residencies in the school. We do a couple summer, summer camps. We do a lot of, um, new play development for students for, for college age students as well. Um, as far as the professional equity productions that we do, we typically do a new play festival every year where we take submissions from playwrights. This year we, from September to November; we got 700 new plays submitted to us. We have a panel of readers and a literary team that, that reads and evaluates those plays.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (06:14):

Then we narrow it down to four plays that we do readings with a professional cast for, um, we just finished those readings in June. Then we'll take two of those plays. We'll do a 29-hour workshop of one in November, and we'll fully produce another play. Uh, the one, the play that we think is most ready for a full production, similar to what happened with "Satellites," we'll fully produce that next year. Um, we typically also do a, a New Jersey premier. This year we're doing "Selling Kabul," uh, by Sylvia Houry that it was, um, in 2022, it was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and had a successful production in New York. So, we're

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doing the first production in New Jersey in September. And then we're also commissioning, um, two playwrights to write plays about New Jersey history, which is under our "Liberty Live" umbrella. And we'll develop those, at least one of those plays, uh, over a two-year cycle and fully produce that in two years.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:12):

I think that's, that's excellent that you're creating an opportunity for new playwrights to have their, their work developed. And if I understood that correctly, and if my math is serving me, that means that satellites was one out of 700 plays that was chosen. So all the flowers to you, Erin, that's an even bigger number-

ERIN BREZNITSKY (07:30):

Thank you very much.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:31):

- than I had imagined. So that's wonderful that I'm, I'm amazed at that number. So congrats again. Erin, if you could tell me, uh, what this "Satellites" journey has been like for you from, you know, this, this idea in your mind to getting to the, the paper, to your inner reading, to you are now having your play produced. I wanna hear about the excitement behind that. I wanna hear about all of the nerves, everything that goes into building, um, a new world, basically, because you did build a new world.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (08:07):

Yeah, gosh. Um, it, it's certainly been a long journey. I finished the very first draft of this play on March 15th, 2020. Um, so as we know, the world has changed significantly since that day and that time. Um, and I found that a lot of the themes in the play, uh, unintentionally are even more resonant now than they were then. So that's been an interesting part of the rewriting process is, you know, for example, a lot of the, um, the play deals with connection and how we reach out for connection, um, both physically and emotionally, even if we're not in the same geographical place, that's something that we certainly all experienced throughout most of 2020 and are still experiencing now we're recording this over a zoom

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when we're not physically in the same room. Um, so I think the ways in which people reach out for connection, uh, certainly informed the rewrites for this piece.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (08:59):

I think the uncertainty of the future, uh, whether it's in terms of the planet or this couple's relationship is something that we all feel very palpably now. So, all of those things that we're sort of swirling around, um, culturally in the world have informed the way this play has taken shape. Um, but I think the, the play really took off when it got accepted into the play festival last year. You know, I, I mentioned I had done a Zoom reading of it, which was lovely, but you can't really get audience feedback over Zoom. You can only really hear it out loud and then you turn off your computer and, and say goodnight. Uh, so hearing it in front of an audience for the first time last spring really informed a lot about the piece and I think told us a lot about what the play needed.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (09:48):

We did another workshop of the piece just internally in December with a few actors where we put, changed the order of different scenes and took things out and put them back in. And as John mentioned, the play is not linear. So that was a great experience to just play around with the puzzle pieces and see what fit together the best. And I, the script that we're working with now, I'm thrilled with where it is. We're, we're still exploring and we're still gonna do some trimming and things like that, but I think, uh, I could not have foreseen on March 15th, 2020, this draft of the piece, but it's, now that we're working with it, I can't see it any other way.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:25):

Now. Are these the same actors that did the reading last year or you auditioned new actors for this production?

JOHN J. WOOTEN (10:32):

We actually auditioned new actors. The actor who's playing Captain Mike is actually the one that did the spring reading, the initial reading. And then we have a new actress, Ellyn Heald, who's playing, um,

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Catherine. So, um, they have wonderful chemistry to- together. We were just talking about that before we logged on. How happy we are to, to have this team working on, on the production. And, you know, it's a two-hander, but it's gonna feel like a full production because we're going sometimes from space to the present, to the beach, to all these different locales. It's gonna be super exciting. We're actually working for the first time at Premiere Stages with a three-projector set up. So we're gonna have a, a rear projector, two front projectors, all displaying different projections that kind of create, uh, the location that we're in. So we, we might go from when the audience just walk in and it's just stars for pre-show, so everywhere you look is just space and the stars to transitioning to a living room on earth, um, present day to a living room 16 years earlier to a library, to the beach, to a back patio.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (11:42):

So it's gonna be, you know, it's, it's really important to me because of the elements of time and space that we can seamlessly just transition from one location to the other in just a matter of seconds. So it's, it's gonna be pretty cool.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (11:58):

This might sound weird, but I'm such a huge fan of projection in, uh, live theater. I would love to know who your scenic designer is that you're working with.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (12:07):

Sure, sure. So David Barber is the scenic designer, and Paul Deziel is the projection designer. So, they're working really closely together to kind of create how projections interact with the scenery. And then Zack Gage, uh, our lighting designer, um, and Chad Raines, our sound designer are also really, uh, intricately involved in how to kind of add those elements into the whole look of projection, set, sound lights, everything.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (12:36):

Now for those who might be listening who aren't familiar with the, the rehearsal process, the theater process, um, is everyone, uh, on the crew at this first rehearsal or is this reading just for you and for the actors? Who else was there with you today?

JOHN J. WOOTEN (12:53):

Well, we did a production meeting before the rehearsal started. Um, so we had all the designers here, um, and we had, we have a lot of interns, college- age interns that work with us that also serve on crew. A lot of them sat in, uh, at the beginning of the rehearsal. We went from the production meeting to all the designers, talked about their vision for the show, and shared some images and some sounds. Um, and then when we started the table work, some of that, that team stuck around and, and heard it. Uh, we did, we did, uh, a read through. Um, it's great, the union, Actors Equity Association allows us to do a read through a month before when we're, when the actors are coming in and doing measurements and getting their payroll processed so that Erin was afforded the opportunity to hear the play with the actors a month prior to rehearsal. So she was able to do some tweaks on the script at that time, but a lot of the designers came to that readthrough and, and were, were able to experience it for the first time with the actors.

GINA MARIE RORIGUEZ (13:51):

And I think you mentioned earlier that Erin, you're still in the process of, of working on rewrites, is that correct?

ERIN BREZNITSKY (13:57):

Yeah, we're gonna be working on the script all throughout the rehearsal process. So everything that we find every day, we'll, we'll go into the script.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (14:03):

Wonderful. I love that the actors can inform a new work in that way. You can, and you're living it in the moment with them. I would be a nervous wreck at this point, like having, you know, a new work produced. So, hopefully I'm not projecting my fears onto you, but I'd love to know what, you know, what did it feel like today? You got to hear it a month ago, but, but this is really like the first day that you guys are working together where everyone is, is in it, you know, you're in it to win it. So Erin, what are you feeling right now just having come out of rehearsal?

ERIN BREZNITSKY (14:38):

Oh, man. I mean, there's certainly nerves, but they're, they're good nerves. I mean, this feels like it's been such a long time coming. Um, I mean, having worked on the script on my own for a couple years and then having, I think I found out that this play was going to be produced, um, early July of last year. So, it's been almost a full year that, that we've, this has been sort of looming and, and I've been looking forward to it. So yes, there's nerves and, and this is, um, a, a benchmark for this script. Um, but I'm just excited that we're finally able to jump in and, and on a personal note, having grown up not far from here in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, which is, you know, the same county as Premiere, uh, it feels like a really lovely homecoming. So I'm, the, the nerves are all going to a good place.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (15:28):

Good. I'm, I'm glad to hear that. <Laugh>, I'm excited for you.

ERIN BREZNITSKY (15:32):

Ask me again on opening night, but today I feel great, <laugh>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:34):

Good. Good, good, good. So I guess my, my last question really for each of you is what are you hoping that audiences will take away after having seen this show, experienced the show with you?

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ERIN BREZNITSKY (15:47):

Sure. Um, gosh, I, I hope they have a good experience in the theater, first and foremost, but I, I hope that, um, this play sends a message of hope. I think we are dealing with some heavy themes. Um, these characters, we certainly put them through the ringer, <laugh>, over the course of the play, um, with their relationship and, and they have to go to some emotional highs and lows, both of them. Um, but I, I hope we end on a place of hope and possibility for the future.

JOHN J. WOOTEN (16:17):

And I, I echo that sentiment and also hope that people are still talking about the play when they're driving home afterwards, and how it resonates to the world that we live in and, and the lives that they lead and, and, um, how they can continue to think about the play moving forward. You know, well after the production's over. Also hope that, um, you know, we, we've have some publishers that, that come out and scout the productions. The play that we, the new play that we produced last year was actually just published by Theater Rights Worldwide. So certainly gonna invite that publisher out to, to see this and, you know, invite some producers out. Um, the other thing that you always hope for with a, a, a new play is that it continues to have a long life after the production, the first production. So hopefully, um, not only will people be driving home talking about it, um, in July, but hopefully for years to come at, at other theaters and other venues.

GINA MARIE RORIGUEZ (17:16):

And I have to echo that sentiment. <Laugh>, after having listened to you guys today, I really truly believe that it, this piece is going to do wonderfully well. Uh, I love hearing your passion about it. Um, and I also think that, you know, we should be focused more on what is happening to our climate and and to the world that we're living in. So I hope that the audiences do take away everything that you have intended for this show. I'm so happy for you both, and I'm looking forward to it. And thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:48):

“Satellites” will run from July 13 through July 30<sup>th</sup> at Premiere Stages at Kean University in Union, NJ.

For more information, be sure to visit [premierestagesatkean.com](http://premierestagesatkean.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 a very special thanks to our guests, Erin Breznitsky and John J. Wooten.

I’m Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts podcast. Thanks for listening.

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