



Get Ready for Christmas with "A Charlie Brown Christmas: Live On Stage"

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([00:03](#)):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. I dare to say that we've all heard of Charlie Brown and the Peanuts Gang. Yes? And if not, where have you been? Charlie Brown, created by Charles M. Schultz first appeared in 1950 in the St. Paul Pioneer Press. Over 70 years later, Charlie Brown and his friends are still entertaining audiences. A Charlie Brown Christmas was the first television program based on Schultz's comic strip, and it aired in 1965. Since then, the beloved Christmas Classic has been adapted for the stage with much acclaim. "A Charlie Brown Christmas: Live On Stage" has been delighting Peanuts fans since 2013. The touring production will soon be stopping at the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown, New Jersey, for a one-day, two-performance run. Today, I spoke with director Robbie Simpson about his take on the Holiday classic and the journey that led him here.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:02](#)):

Before we jump into Charlie Brown, I want to know a little bit more about you? I know that's a really broad question, so I'll give you a better intro. Can you tell me how you got into theater? Where did your entertainment journey begin?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([01:15](#)):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





Yes, yes, it's a good question. I grew up in Western Massachusetts in the Berkshire's area/region where it's so culturally rich. So there's Mass Mocha and Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow for dance, but there's also several regional theaters up there, so Berkshire Theater Festival, Shakespeare and Company, Williamstown. So as a kid, my parents were always taking me to theater up there, going down to New York to see Broadway shows, going to Boston to see touring companies. My parents both were not in the arts or artistic per se, but definitely patrons, patrons of the arts. So early on I got the acting bug and then started working as a kid professionally, right in that Berkshire's area. So whenever there was a kid needed for a Neil Simon play or Christmas Carol or something, I started being paid when I was young to be in a show and just developed a sense of professionalism and having a job and just really fell in love with the professional side of it as well as the artistic side.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([02:17](#)):

And I was seeing people who were making a living as actors and in the theater and realized you didn't need to be famous to be able to pay your bills and have a family to be in this industry. So I went to Syracuse University for a BFA in acting, which I so loved. Spent a semester in London at the Globe Theater, which is just so special because when I was there I thought, oh gosh, I always want to go back to London and work in London and a month from tomorrow I leave to go to London to actually start my next job there, which I'm just so thrilled about. So it's kind of a full circle moment.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([02:52](#)):

Congratulations!

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([02:54](#)):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, I'm directing a play over there over Christmas, which will be so fun.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (02:59):

What play?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([03:00](#)):

It's called Afterglow. It was a play that I was in the original company in New York off Broadway, and we ran for a year and a half and the show blew up and there's been productions all over the country and all over the world in Mexico City and Madrid and Buenos Aires and got quite popular. So we're bringing our production to London and I am on the directing team of it there. So I'm not in it this time, but directing. So thrilled to do that. But then I went to New York for a year after Syracuse, really loved my time in New York, and then everyone that was doing what I wanted to be doing had gone to grad school for acting and had a graduate degree in MFA in acting. And so I went to graduate school at the Old Globe in San Diego, California. I was there for two years, and then I came back to New York and it really did change my career.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([03:53](#)):

I got the agents that I wanted to be with. I was doing a new theater, I was doing television and classical theater, just all of the things that were kind of in my bucket list, my vision board of the kind of work I wanted to do. And then like I spoke about, I was doing this play called Afterglow in New York and had a lot to do with the editing of the play and the direction of the play. And after the show opened, it ran for a very long time, and I kind of started to realize I didn't love doing the show eight times a week every night. What I really loved was the rehearsal process and the creation of it and the collaboration with all

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





of the different designers. So after that, I just started reaching out to some mentors and some people and talked about how do I start to have a career as a director.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([04:37](#)):

And I became an associate on the national tour of Chicago the Musical, and then was an associate on the national tour of A Christmas Story the Musical, and started just working regionally a little bit. And then actually I got a call from the general manager of Charlie Brown Christmas who had been the general manager of Afterglow the show that I really first started directing on, and they knew that I had worked on a Christmas story, which is a very popular, profitable, national touring production, and it just was the right fit. And here we are in rehearsal for year three of Charlie Brown Christmas.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([05:12](#)):

Wow, what a story. So I'm hearing that Afterglow was your first foray into direction then, or when you realized that you wanted to direct?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([05:20](#)):

Yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([05:20](#)):

You're coming full circle. That's wonderful.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





ROBBIE SIMPSON ([05:22](#)):

Yes, it's so wonderful and I feel like we in the theater developed like these little creative families, and so both Charlie Brown Christmas and Afterglow, I have these wonderful collaborations with fantastic creative teams that we get to come back to work together, and we're about to go off to Wyoming with Charlie Brown Christmas with our set designer and our lighting designer and costume designer and choreographer and all the wonderful folks that every year we get together around this time of year and put on a big spectacular Broadway-caliber commercial musical. And then we also get to have some fun together while we do it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([05:59](#)):

Well, I would hope you're having fun. It looks like a really fun show. Do you still perform or have you shifted entirely to direction?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([06:07](#)):

I do. I do. I just got to play a dream role. I did Tom in Tennessee Williams' play "The Glass Menagerie" in February and March up in Massachusetts, actually in the Berkshires area at a theater called The Majestic Theater, and it was so wonderful. So yes, I still act. Last summer, I spent the summer on General Hospital filming for the summer with them and then got the call to come back again this summer. And then of course two days later, the actor strike happened. Thankfully, the theater is still going strong, coming back from Covid, but still going strong, so that has been the source of income as of late. So still

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





very much performing. I have a wonderful manager and wonderful agent that represent me both for acting and directing, and so we kind of just decide which projects are the best in the moment and what's going to be most creatively interesting.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:01](#)):

Well, I'm very glad to hear that you are booked and busy. I'm sorry to hear that the strike unfortunately took away your next General Hospital stint, but the show must go on. Thank God for theater.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([07:13](#)):

Absolutely.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:15](#)):

Let's pivot, shall we? Let's actually focus on Charlie Brown Christmas. I will admit I was not a huge Peanuts fan. I only just recently watched the television program, which was I think originally in 1965 was A Charlie Brown Christmas. So can you tell me what the similarities are between the television program and the show and how it's grown?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([07:42](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I am similar to you where I did not, I was not super familiar with the special, I'd watched it as a kid and certainly knew the comic strips a little bit, but let me tell you about the fandom of Charlie Brown and Snoopy and the Peanuts folks because it is larger than I ever could have imagined.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





When we're going to see the show and I drop in on productions around the country, I mean the people that are coming in costumes and bringing their stuffed animals and are just so excited to be seeing the show and specifically the popularity of the Christmas special has I think even made the popularity of the peanuts and Snoopy even more popular. There's something about- they are children that the story is about, of course, Schroeder and Lucy and Sally, but they talk so intelligently about their emotions and their feelings.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([08:39](#)):

Charlie Brown Christmas is about Charlie Brown actually saying, "I feel depressed about Christmas because I don't know what it's all about." And having a, they never specifically say how old these kids are, but say having an 8 to 9/10-year-old saying, I'm feeling depressed about Christmas time, I think is a feeling a lot of adults feel whether you are going into the holidays thinking whether you're missing a loved one that isn't there this year, or whether there was a bad memory last year or maybe even you're hoping that this holiday season will achieve X, Y, and Z for you, and then that doesn't happen and you are left feeling empty. I think that the holidays are a really tricky time. So to be watching this story through the lens of a child discovering what it means for them to be depressed, and then inevitably over the course of the special and the musical finding how Charlie finds his inspiration and finds his joy and is able to find happiness in Christmas through his friends, through his dog, through the plot of the show is him directing the Christmas play and successfully doing so is quite beautiful.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([09:47](#)):

And I think a story that, yes, your kids are going to love, but parents are going to love it. Grandparents are going to love it because they're the ones who actually grew up with the Christmas special. So it's such a successful story and we love the way that we have translated it to the stage, keeping all of that nostalgic joy and sweetness that you remember, but also making it a high-caliber musical with exceptional choreography, complex harmonies that you will hopefully recognize as a Broadway-caliber show that matches just right up there with all the other Disney shows that you might be seeing on

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





Broadway. So we're thrilled to be bringing it to folks all over the country to different communities, bringing it to different people who might need a little bit of that joy this year.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([10:32](#)):

You said something that I find so important there that we're watching these children and the moral of the story really is coming through the lens of a child, and I think adults can learn so much by seeing themselves in a younger version of themselves or of their own children and to practice their, "I feel" statements, I say, is wonderful that we're teaching children to be more vocal, to share their emotions, and I love that it can come through something as fun as Charlie Brown. You also mentioned that Charlie Brown in the show is directing his own show. Do you find any similarities between you and Charlie Brown as you are directing this wonderful cast?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([11:21](#)):

Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. I was joking the other day, one of Charlie Brown's lines is, "I don't know anything about directing a Christmas play." And I was like, "well, me too." Yeah, of course. I think with any artistic venture, it's emotional and you can sometimes doubt your own abilities, and it's interesting how I go through a little bit of a push and pull with my confidence about the show. The fun part and the reward of Charlie Brown Christmas is that we've been able to do this three years now. We're in our third year of doing the show. The first year we had two companies, one that toured around the country and one that came to New York and the one that was in New York had wonderful mention by the New York Times and Newsweek, and we got a lot of publicity that first year. We had all the Peanuts executives come and see the show.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([12:15](#)):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





There are a lot of different estates that are involved, as you can imagine with Charles Schultz, the cartoon, the incredibly iconic Vince Guaraldi music, the jazz trio, and then the theatrical rights for Charlie Brown are also under a different set of folks that are looking at that. And to have all of them come and see the Christmas special and our musical Charlie Brown Christmas and say that we really captured the heart of the show and the spirit of the sweetness and the Christmas magic was just such a wonderful confidence booster and made me feel like, yeah, we really did it right and we found really wonderful people to tell the story on stage and off. So a little bit of that imposter syndrome has gone away because we've gotten to do it the last two years since then. But definitely feeling a little bit of Charlie Brown that first year and wanting to be liked, but also wanting to put on a kick butt show for everyone definitely makes me feel a little bit like relating to Charlie Brown in those moments.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([13:23](#)):

Well, with all of its accolades I think that you should be proud of yourself. You're obviously doing a wonderful job, but we all go through imposter syndrome, so that's okay. You and Charlie Brown, me and Charlie Brown, all of us and Charlie Brown. Really, is it a faux pas if I ask you who your favorite character is and we can pretend that it's just the comic strip so that we're not insulting any of your actors?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([13:43](#)):

No, no, no. It's a good question. And you know what? I think it changes depending on the year or depending on what day I'm having. I think today, I probably have to say Snoopy, the way that we, in theater, it's fun because you get to interpret, especially how do you have a dog on stage? Our Snoopy is played by a fantastic actor and just brings Snoopy to life in such a wonderful way that you can't help but look at him and just be beaming and smiling. And I think throughout the course of the 90-minute

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





musical is just so surprising and it's surprising you at every turn, not just with the incredible physical comedy, but with incredible gymnastic skills and just how Snoopy plays a lot of different parts throughout the course of the show is just really fun. And the actor that is playing him is always just coming up with fun things that just make me laugh. And you can't help but watch him and watch the show and not be having a good time. So that's my answer right now. But if you ask me in a couple hours, I might have different favorite character.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([14:52](#)):

Well, now I'm curious. I'll check in with you tomorrow and see what you say then.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([14:56](#)):

Perfect.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([14:57](#)):

I wanted to ask you, three years is a decent amount of time. How many different casts have you gone through or has this been the same cast with you for a full three years?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([15:05](#)):

This is the fourth cast that we've had. The first year, we had two companies. Last year we had a New York company that also did the national tour, and then this year it's just a national touring company. But what is so thrilling and the best compliment for me is that this year there was almost a completely

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





returning cast. It's about a 90% returning cast. We only have a few new cast members that are joining us this year. And this year, there's people that have done it all three years, the same amount of time that we've done it. There are people that were in it year one and are now returning in year three. There are people that did the show last year and are now coming back for year three. But as a director, that just means the world to me that I think that where we choose to spend our time and our energy and our focus, not even just as creatives, but as people in the world, I think that that's more important than money, is where we choose to spend our time.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([16:01](#)):

And so the fact that these folks want to come back and tell this story again and had such a good time telling the story and want to keep doing this show is just such a high compliment. We all have a great time together, and I tell the cast that the worst thing you can do is send your actors out around the country with a bad show. And I said, I promise to be sending you out around the country with a kick butt show that you're going to enjoy telling and enjoy your time on and off the stage. People come back year after year to do the show because they say that it's just that they love the community, they love the people, and they love the response of the audiences to the show.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([16:40](#)):

That's really lovely. I love what you said. Really time is currency. That's the most important thing in our lives. We don't have much of it, so use your time wisely. I'm glad that you're all having fun, and I'm sure that that's radiating on stage for, who would you say is your best audience? I mean, I'm assuming families, but what age group do you really recommend this show for?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([17:03](#)):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





What I love is I think that parents bring their kids of all ages, whether they're 6 or 13 or 12. But then I think there's so much in the show that we put in the show for adults that are, it's almost kind of like a Pixar movie where there's maybe the original intent is for kids, but then the parents are enjoying it just as much, or the parents are picking up on all the jokes and the references that the kids aren't understanding. Or maybe the grandparents are bringing their grandkids or it's a three generations are enjoying it, and adults are picking up on a lot of the references. The show is about the Peanuts putting on a play. So there are so many references to Broadway, A Chorus Line, Wicked, that folks might pick up on if they're keen on the theater or just know these characters and have grown up with these characters. And like you pointed out, the Christmas special came back in '65, so my father grew up with the Christmas special. We all did. So we all have a different relationship with it, and to introduce it to the next generation I think is just always exciting. And when you get to enjoy yourself at the same time, what could be better at Christmas time?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([18:17](#)):

I think you've successfully made me want to attend the show as well. And I am an adult, I think. I don't like to think of myself as one, but unfortunately I think I qualify.

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([18:28](#)):

Me too.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([18:29](#)):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





I'm curious as to the Christian undertones of the story. There's, at least in the television program, I know there is, I think it's Linus quotes, he quotes the Bible, right? So I'm wondering, is this show for all denominations, is there more of a Christian undertone?

ROBBIE SIMPSON ([18:45](#)):

It's a great question because in putting the show together, it's definitely something I was conscious of and thinking about and honoring the original source material, but making everyone feel welcome, which is, I think exactly what we're doing. Yes, there is one moment where Linus steps forward and it's this beautiful quoting of the Bible, but it's really just at its core telling a story, telling a beautiful story about empathy, accepting others and the joy and simplicity that can come with Christmas. So he just tells this really wonderful story. There are some Christmas songs in it that just have those religious undertones, but we tell them and sing them in a very fun, exciting, open way. So I think if you're a fan of the Christmas special, if you have a wonderful deep connection to your religious upbringing or what you practice, I think you'll feel welcome and happy. But if that's not something that you're looking for, I think that you'll also feel very comfortable seeing the show. And I think we do a very successful job of making everyone feel included. No matter what you're looking for or what you believe.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([19:58](#)):

A Charlie Brown Christmas Live On Stage, will reach the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown, New Jersey on November 26th for two performances only; with one performance at 2:00 PM and the last at 5:00 PM. For more information, be sure to visit MayoArts.org. 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 JerseyArts.com. The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride, New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show was co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me. Gina

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





Marie Rodriguez. Executive Producer is Jim Atkinson. And my thanks to Robbie Simpson for speaking with me today. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

