

“A LEGACY OF LAUGHTER AND MUSIC”

PLAYBILL SPEAKS WITH “*BUGS BUNNY ON BROADWAY*” CREATOR AND CONDUCTOR GEORGE DAUGHERTY

PLAYBILL: We realise you’ve probably told the story a hundred times, but how **DID** you got the idea for *Bugs Bunny On Broadway*?

GEORGE DAUGHERTY: Well, I think a hundred times would be an extremely conservative estimate. I’m sure I’ve told this story at least a thousand times! But it’s always fun to remember how we got this thing going . . .

To put it in a nutshell, I had two very strong reasons behind my desire to create *Bugs Bunny on Broadway*. The first stemmed from my great memories of these cartoons from my own childhood. They are so brilliant, and practically every kid in America got their first dose of classical music from these incredible cartoons. Wagner, Rossini, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Smetana, Strauss, Von Suppe, Donizetti, Mendelssohn — they are ALL in these cartoons – and in this concert -- and more. Bugs and his animators all had their way with these great composers.

And without ‘dulling down’ the music at all — or in any way being disrespectful or derogatory to the original compositions — they made this great music totally irresistible — and unforgettable — to kids (and adults) who weren’t normally drawn to classical music. So I really wanted to pay homage to a very memorable part of my own — and millions of other people’s — childhoods. And as we have toured this concert around the world — Australia, Russia, China, Japan, Korea, England, Canada, South America, Europe — I have discovered that it wasn’t just American kids who fell in love with these cartoons. They are universal, universally beloved, and they cross boundaries, and borders, and language barriers.

And my second reason was a really strong desire to create a concert which pulls people into the concert hall who might not otherwise come . . . and that has been the case throughout the 16-year history of *Bugs Bunny On Broadway* . . . this concert, just like the cartoons, has also introduced a lot of ADULTS to the incredible magic of the symphony orchestra, and then they come back for what we like to call ‘normal’ concerts.

So, the truly magical thing about these cartoons – and the music – is that they are as equally appealing to first-time concertgoers as they are to seasoned classical music aficionados. And actually, it’s the savvy classical music fans who REALLY get the “inside musical jokes.” So the concert has an extremely wide demographic, both in terms of age, and in terms of musical knowledge and experience.

But how did I think of doing it as a concert? Well, it was almost an accident. I mean, I have been referred to in newspaper interviews as “cartoon nut George Daugherty” or “animation aficionado George Daugherty” – but the truth is that although I loved these cartoons as a child, I did sort of forget about them in my teens, and went about the business of studying to be a classical musician. And then in the 1980’s I finished up my conservatory training and went about establishing a “serious conducting

career.” By the time I was in my mid-20’s, I was conducting at places like the Munich State Opera and American Ballet Theatre, and I wasn’t thinking AT ALL about cartoons!

You also have to remember that in the early 1980’s, DVD’s hadn’t been invented, absolutely nobody had a home computer, there were no satellite dish networks, audio CD’s were barely out there, people were still playing vinyl, cable television was in its infancy, most people still had an antenna on their roof and hardly anybody even had a VCR. (Hard to believe.) So unless you got up on Saturday morning to watch these cartoons on television, they weren’t very visible during this decade. They weren’t very available, because technology was nothing like it is now.

One night, however, I was visiting with some friends who were animators, and THEY had a VCR! And they had some of the first-released Bugs Bunny commercial VHS tapes. Well suddenly, I was seeing “What’s Opera, Doc?” and “The Rabbit of Seville,” and all these masterpieces for the first time since childhood, but now as an adult conductor and musician, I realized that they had been created by some formidable geniuses. And for some inexplicable reason – some people actually called it “insane” -- I wanted to perform them. Live. In front of an audience.

So that’s what drove us to create the concert. But obviously, we couldn’t have done it without the support, assistance, and enthusiasm of Warner Bros. And Warner Bros. was extremely enthusiastic about this production from the moment we proposed it to them. They made it possible for the dream to become a reality. I think they realized that it would celebrate their brilliant cartoons . . . cartoons that were such a part of their history . . . in a very unique way. They have been our partners from day one. Among countless millions of animation aficionados the world over, the Warner Bros. Studios cartoons are in a class by themselves, and so for us to get a chance to work with this material, to reconstruct and restore them for live performance – to actually “perform them” for cheering audiences – has been the project and opportunity of a lifetime.

PLAYBILL: How many times do you think you have conducted the show now, both in the US and around the world.

GEORGE DAUGHERTY: I can’t even count. It’s been 16 years now. Hundreds of times. Maybe over a thousand times. We’ve tallied up that more than a million and a quarter people have seen it. It’s been amazing.

PLAYBILL: It seems to have had a long life as a show. Have you been performing it consistently for the past 16 years?

GD: We’ve performed the concert many times per year, every year since 1990. Some years are heavier than others, some years we have major international or US tours, other years more scattered single performances and engagements. And there have been many, many memorable moments, incredible performances, and unforgettable cities. So we’ve done it steadily since its premiere on Broadway in 1990. It is also very popular in the U.S. in the summertime, and also around Christmas. We’ve played to audiences as large as 20,000 in one concert at The Hollywood Bowl. Our most unique performances took place in Time Square in New York, where the entire square

was blocked from traffic for blocks and blocks, the orchestra played on top of a three-story building, and we used the gigantic, legendary Times Square Diamondvision screen as “our screen.” It was free to the public that day, and over 160,000 New Yorkers saw it in one fell swoop. I might add that it’s very windy in Times Square on top of a building.

PLAYBILL: It seems like a pretty good gig: fly around the world, travel light, work with leading orchestras in world-famous venues ...

GD: Well, I don’t exactly travel light. I’m very big on taking my entire life on the road with me. But it *is* incredible. I have been lucky to conduct some of the greatest orchestras in the world — The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, The Royal Philharmonic, The San Francisco Symphony, The Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Moscow Philharmonic — in some of the most legendary concert venues in the world. The Hollywood Bowl, The Kremlin (yes, THE KREMLIN), The Royal Festival Hall, The Chicago Symphony’s Orchestra Hall — and, of course, on Broadway at The Gershwin Theatre. It has been an amazing experience.

Luckily, though, I also get to conduct ‘normal’ concerts with many of these wonderful orchestras at other times throughout the year, which allows me to occasionally hone my craft WITHOUT the assistance of cartoon characters. But I’m never one to complain about my long-time association with Bugs!

PLAYBILL: And what do these legendary orchestras think about playing “cartoon music.”

GD: Well, there is nothing “cartoony” about the music, other than the animated visuals. The music is actually extremely difficult – very virtuosic. Carl Stalling, the original Warner Bros. Animation composer, was a master musician, and a superb orchestrator. He also had a wry musical sense of humour that was incredibly sophisticated. He knew exactly when to unleash the full furry of the entire orchestra, and he also knew when to apply a minimalist touch for even more stunning effect. An example is when Wile E. Coyote takes the plunge from some mountaintop or other – which happens invariably in every Road Runner cartoon. As Wile is falling, the orchestra usually follows him right down the precipice with a cascading crescendo of furious chromatics. And just when the Coyote hits bottom, and you expect a REALLY big crash of music, Stalling just has the alto flute play a pianissimo toot. The restraint . . . the unexpected restraint . . . magnifies the effect immeasurably. So Stalling was a genius. And Milt Franklyn, who first started working under Stalling as his orchestrator and eventually took over, was a chip off the old blockbuster. He was a genius too. And orchestras recognize this immediately. The musicians instantly recognize the brilliance of the compositions, and the incredibly high musical standard. And then, of course, there is the whole difficulty of playing an entire concert in exact synchronization to cartoons being projected on a big screen! So it is a very unique experience for these orchestras. And I have yet to see a bored musician in 16 years of conducting *Bugs Bunny On Broadway*.

PLAYBILL: What do you enjoy most about your long involvement with the show?

GD: Well, as I already said, working with these spectacular orchestras is a dream for a conductor. And these ensembles are extraordinary . . . they are legendary. I mean, some of the musicians still playing in these orchestras worked directly under Toscanini, Stokowski, Stravinski, Walton, Sir Thomas Beecham . . . their “career life experiences are mesmerizing, priceless, and irreplaceable. And I have tried to soak every bit of it up. I think, in today’s classical music world, there is sometimes a tendency, or philosophy, that “newer, younger, more virtuosic, equals better.” But I have absorbed so much from these seasoned veteran musicians.

It was a magical experience working with the animation legends from the original Warner Bros. Studios too. When we first started with “Bugs Bunny On Broadway,” so many of them were still alive. Mel Blanc, the “man of a thousand voices.” The legendary director Friz Freleng. Master illustrator and background painter Maurice Noble. And of course, the exceptionally brilliant, one-of-a-kind Chuck Jones – who became a mentor to me, and was also a treasured friend with whom I shared many cherished adventures. Chuck is gone now. They are all gone now. But we learned so much from them, and they have left this incredible legacy of laughter and music that will be around for centuries. Truly.

And certainly not least, I have to say the other thing I love so much are the audiences. That is what keeps it fresh and exciting – the reactions of the audience. This is a very interactive concert — the audiences get very involved, and they are very enthusiastic. Some might even be described as slightly rowdy!! Orchestras who have not played the concert before are sometimes surprised the first time around; they are not used to audiences who are so unabashedly, vocally enthusiastic. But they get into it very quickly — it can almost be like a rock concert, at times.

PLAYBILL: Do you still find it fun?

GD: It is always fun. I love performing the show. After 16 years, sometimes I think *I can't rehearse* this concert one more time. But I NEVER get tired of the performances.

Every performance is different — every audience is different. Every orchestra, every city, every country is unique. So there are always surprises and new experiences. New reactions. And the animation – it is so brilliant. These directors — Chuck Jones especially — were absolutely brilliant filmmakers. They were at the absolute top of their game — the best in the business. They represent a truly golden age of cinema. These cartoons are little cinematic jewels. And even after 16 years of conducting them and their extraordinary scores, I STILL see and hear new things. So that is always part of the excitement, the adrenaline rush, and the unabashed enjoyment of conducting this particular concert.

PLAYBILL: What has been especially unforgettable?

GD: Well, opening night on Broadway was pretty unforgettable! And ringing in the new millennium with *Bugs Bunny In Broadway* in Tokyo was quite an experience, as was our first tour to China . . . and of course, there was our first Royal Command Performance of “Bugs.”

But certainly right up there at the very top of the list was our first performance at The Sydney Opera House. I mean, here we were, on the stage of the world's most stunning – and instantly recognizable – opera house. An absolute cultural, architectural, and musical icon. An opera house that virtually the entire world knows on sight. With a sold-out house of extremely enthusiastic Sydney-siders. It was the start of Bug's love affair – and my love affair – with Australia. And since then, we have played two completely sold-out one-week engagements at The Sydney Opera House, and also expanded outward to Melbourne in 2002. And now, here we are again – back at The Opera House for a third time, returning also to Melbourne, and then taking the concert to Adelaide, and then to Auckland, New Zealand.

We always feel so welcomed here. Our performances with The Sydney Symphony and Melbourne Symphony have been remarkable – largely because of the incredible talent, class, and graciousness of the musicians in these orchestras. They are both very unique, and we have had an especially good time with them. They are not only exceptionally great orchestras – they are exceptionally great to work with.

And of course – Australian audiences. I don't know what it is about Bugs and Australians – but Australian audiences have embraced this concert quite enthusiastically. It's worth the trip alone to hear the Australian audience reaction to Bugs' first entrance.

PLAYBILL: How do you still keep it fresh for you?

GD: Well, first of all, it is a VERY difficult concert for the conductor as well. Even after 16 years. Keeping a live orchestra — sometimes 100 musicians — in exact synchronization to these spectacularly fast-paced cartoons projected on a big screen is a very tricky and challenging job for the conductor. It is not for the faint of heart. I often liken it to a two-and-a-half hour roller-coaster ride. Or like running in front of a freight train for an entire evening, trying not to get run over. I cannot let down my guard for a second — even a fraction of a second. And that has a tendency to keep things extremely fresh! *Bugs Bunny On Broadway* is definitely not one of those concerts you can do in your sleep.

PLAYBILL: Do you have any particular favourite piece in the show? Which one and why. Who's your favourite Looney Toons character and why.

GD: Answering either one of these questions is like asking a parent who their favourite child is. All of the cartoons in the show — and all of the characters — have their own unique and very specific special qualities. They are all so wonderful. Each of the cartoons represents a very special era in the Warner Bros. history, and is indicative of the unique talents and style of the director who brought it to life. I do have to say, though, that 'What's Opera, Doc?' and 'The Rabbit of Seville' are both very dear to my heart. I mean, who else but Chuck Jones could have taken all 23 hours of Wagner's Ring Cycle (as well the major leitmotifs from *Tannhauser*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Lohengrin*) and delivered the whole thing in seven minutes and 30 seconds flat? That's 'What's Opera, Doc?'!! Franklyn's score is incredible for this cartoon – so many of the Wagnerian leitmotifs and themes are totally intact, but the experience is quite different from the original operas.

And as for ‘The Rabbit of Seville’, I don’t care how sophisticated an ‘opera lover’ a person may be, I defy them to tell me that when they hear ‘The Barber of Seville’ Overture at a concert or at the opera, that they don’t have at least a momentary flash of Bugs slicing a fruit salad on Elmer Fudd’s bald head. That’s how much these cartoons — and *that* cartoon — have become a part of global pop culture. Actually, not just pop culture, but culture in general. And audiences all over the world chuckle *before* that moment happens in the cartoon. They know it’s coming, they know it very, very well. It’s no accident!! These cartoons and these characters are icons to many, many hundreds of millions of people.

And, well, as for favourite characters — well again, I have to work with them all, so I can’t pick favourites. But I DO just have to say that Bugs Bunny has been very, very good to me.

PLAYBILL: In your experience, what do audiences enjoy most about the show?

GD: There are so many things to enjoy. First of all, there is the excitement and immediacy of the music. People who have seen — and heard — *Bugs Bunny On Broadway* say that they will never be able to hear animation music in the same way, or watch cartoons in the same way. The composers who wrote and adapted these cartoon scores — the incredibly brilliant Carl Stalling and Milt Franklyn — were spectacular composers in their own rights, and were absolutely extraordinary orchestrators; they were phenomenally inventive musicians.

They were incredibly knowledgeable, so when they did a send-up of Wagner or Rossini, it was done with love and respect and admiration and musical accuracy—but at the same time, with an absolutely hilarious sense of humour. But NEVER with disrespect to the original composer’s masterpiece. If anything, Stalling and Franklyn celebrated the original works. The music for the Warner Bros. cartoons has always had an instantly identifiable and incredibly distinctive sound. You know it the minute you hear it. But when you hear it LIVE, it is a really an ‘in your face’ experience, and the music is absolutely phenomenal. It is larger — and louder — than life. So that is certainly one thing.

I also think that this concert affords audiences a very unique way to *see* these cartoons. Most people have only seen the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies on television, or on video. On a small screen, in the privacy of home, or with just a few people. But that is not how they were made. They were made in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s to be seen in movie theatres, on BIG screens, with thousands of people laughing together. The cartoons’ timings and style were designed to accommodate the laughter of an audience. And that is how audiences see them in *Bugs Bunny on Broadway* — they see these cartoons in the way they were made to be seen, meant to be seen. With the almost-deafening sound of laughter, in a totally theatrical environment. And that’s a very invigorating thing!

I also think that different segments of the audience enjoy the concert in different ways. Kids love this concert on a very basic and visceral level — they love these cartoons. They laugh A LOT. They are fast and furious, colourful, funny, engaging, and of course, there is all this great music. But unlike so many other cartoons and things from our childhoods, these particular cartoons really grow up with you as you get

older . . . and when you are an adult, you see a whole new sophistication in these Bugs Bunny classics. That is what makes them so special; you can watch them your whole life, and always see something new. With each passing year, there is something you didn't notice before.

I think that's why our audiences see this concert over, and over, and over. These cartoons don't just have double entendres . . . they have triple and quadruple entendres, and then some! It really plays to an extremely wide age group, in a very unique way.

I don't know why, but this concert seems to attract the greatest audiences in the world. Maybe it's Bugs's indefatigable independence, his unique sense of humour, and his refusal to 'suffer fools gladly'. His generosity. His musicality! I don't know. But this rabbit pulls in a very special and unique audience, unlike anything I have ever seen before. And at the end of the day – at the end of the performance – those audiences are what have kept us going for 16 years!