Ruth Candler 00:14
Welcome to W&L After Class, the lifelong learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. In every episode we'll have engaging conversations with W&L's expert faculty, bringing you again to the Colonnade even if you're hundreds of miles away, just like the conversations that happen every day after class here at W&L. You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds and continue your journey of lifelong learning.

Our guest today is Rob Mish, director of the Lenfest Center of the Arts since 2005 and adjunct instructor in the Department of Theater, Dance and Film Studies, where he has taught Introduction to Theater, Acting and Musical Theater and more. Rob has acted in and directed a host of plays and musicals, including university productions of "Mrs. Warren's Profession," "The Night of the Iguana" and the musicals "Kiss Me Kate," "Assassins" and "Legally Blonde." Before becoming director of the Lenfest Center, he spent 15 years working with alumni as W&L's associate director and then director of alumni programs. Rob, it is great to see you, even if it's through a computer screen. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Rob Mish 01:22
Well, thank you. I'm quite flattered, actually, that you've invited me to be here, and being able to let people put up with me for a few minutes.

Ruth Candler 01:33
It's gonna be a fun conversation. Anyone who talks with you about theater will quickly discover that musical theater is your passion. It's good to know that your passion has found a focus right here at Washington and Lee. As the director of the Lenfest Center, you're responsible for directing musicals regularly at W&L. These performances have been very popular over the years, and I'm sure that many of our listeners have either attended a W&L musical or participated in one. Before you take us down memory lane with a few of your favorites, I'd like to ask you a couple basic questions. What are the key components of a musical, and what must a director consider before selecting and staging one?

Rob Mish 02:13
A musical adds certain things that a straight play would not. In other words, you would have — there's obviously music, and so you need a music director, and perhaps if you're using an orchestra, that music director would find the orchestra, and perhaps conduct that himself or herself. Then, of course, most musicals have some sort of choreography involved. So you'll need a choreographer, dance captain, all of those types of things, in addition to the things that would go with a regular play, like designers, costumes, set, lighting, stage managers, all of those types of things, and all of them need to be familiar with musicals too.

The next thing that one must consider in directing a musical, particularly in a place that is relatively small, like we are, is to consider your talent pool. For musicals, we tend to draw on the music department, because we know that they're going to have the best singers, possibly. So we need to find those singers. We also need to find actors and dancers at the same time. In the '50s, when "West Side Story" came out, between that incredible team that put that together, they developed this idea of the
triple threat, someone who could act, sing and dance. And since that time, all of us have been trying to find that person. Before that, you had choruses of singers, you had dance teams, a dance chorus, if you will.

But finding an actor to be able to do all three of those things can be challenging. And so you want to consider your talent pool. And then you probably will have a host of choices that you're going to draw from, choices of titles. But it doesn't make sense to choose one if the title is out of range of what you want to do. For example, if you're going to choose a very large-cast musical, and you've just graduated, the year before, you know, five or six actors and singers that you normally would use, then it's not a good idea to pick a large-cast musical.

**Ruth Candler 04:43**
You once told me that in your opinion, "My Fair Lady" was the perfect musical. What makes it so perfect?

**Rob Mish 04:51**
I have said that, and it's not perfect. It's not perfect because one of the things about it, and one of the criticisms of it, has been that there's really not much opportunity for dance. It is a great... It's... The music is unbelievable. The story is fantastic. The book is, because it comes straight from Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," but there's not much choreography in it. I still love it, and in fact, I hadn't seen a full production of it until about five or six years ago. I had this image of it that had been in my mind since a little kid.

**Ruth Candler 05:37**
So perfect except it doesn't have enough dancing.

**Rob Mish 05:41**
That's what the critics have said about it.

**Ruth Candler 05:44**
So "My Fair Lady" first appeared on Broadway 65 years ago, and the story behind it, George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," was written well over 100 years ago. I've heard you say that, "The change in times changes theater." And I suppose that applies to any new production of "My Fair Lady," for it's still being staged. It's fascinating to think of classic musicals being reinvented in light of what modern directors and actors see as their flaws.

Would you walk us through what might happen today in telling the story of Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins?

**Rob Mish 06:22**
Sure. And I'd like to give a little background of Shaw's play "Pygmalion," because at that time... Shaw was a playwright who was very interested in social issues, in class structure, in how one might move from a lower class to more of an upper class, and many of his plays dealt with that. And "Pygmalion" was one of them.
So, like the ancient Greek myth where Pygmalion, a sculptor, sculpts the statue of what he thinks is the perfect woman and the gods bring her to life, that's what Henry Higgins tries to do, in essence, with Eliza — taking her from a Cockney flower girl into... making her into a person who could pass as a duchess at a ball. And she learns about this as a flower girl in Covent Garden at the beginning of the play, and she hears him go on and on about "Why can't the English teach their children how to speak? Norwegians learn Norwegian, the Greeks are taught their Greek — " I know many of the lyrics in that because it's been... I've loved that musical for a long time.

Shaw never intended "Pygmalion" to be a love story. The closest thing you get to it being a love story is the infatuation that Freddy Eynsford-Hill has with Eliza. She doesn't return that infatuation. He sings "On the Street Where You Live," she comes back at him with "Stop talking to me. I have to talk all day long. Why are you making me talk some more?" So there's really not a love story in "My Fair Lady" — in "Pygmalion," rather.

When Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Lowe were putting it together, they knew they had a tough job on their hands. Rodgers and Hammerstein had tried to do a musical of "Pygmalion" and tried for years and couldn't do it. So finally, Lerner and Lowe decided that they'd give it a shot. They knew — and this is how times would change — they knew that a musical might not work, unless it had a love story. So they softened, to a certain extent, the relationship between Eliza and Higgins.

And so at the end of their "My Fair Lady," or their "Pygmalion" story, Eliza and Higgins have had this knockdown, drag-out musical fight in his mother's garden, and he storms out, and he gets to sing a really... The, you know, "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face" as he's walking back from that place and into his house. So he gets to calm down. What's always bothered me about that is that Eliza doesn't get that. All we see is she's just blasted him with "the world can go on without you," and then the next time we see her is when she comes back to his house, walks into his study where he's got all of these recordings of her and he's listening to them, reminiscing about what their time could have been... what their time was like together. And she walks in and she's hearing these recordings and she takes the needle off of... the record he's listening to and says, "I washed my face and hands before I come, I did." And he hears her, leans back in his chair with his hat still on, cocks it forward and says, "Eliza, where the devil are my slippers?" And then the orchestra starts to play — the violins start to play "I Could Have Danced All Night" and the curtain comes down.

That is... That particular ending of the play wouldn't... doesn't sit well with a modern audience. Plus, it doesn't accomplish what Shaw wanted from the beginning. It's the kind of thing where the plot is not resolved. We think... By that ending, we think that Eliza is going to stay there and continue, perhaps, to be his servant, not his love interest. That's the problem. And that was the problem in Shaw's mind with other productions of "Pygmalion" that he saw. And it's the problem with "My Fair Lady." It worked, I suppose, in the '50s and '60s, but then people stopped doing that play, because that was the ending and it leaves you hanging, and not in a good way.

Ruth Candler 10:58
This kind of reinvention or modernization is something we’re used to seeing done with Shakespeare, for instance. But many of the shows being reimagined for today’s stage are much more recent, only decades old. How do you think our rapidly changing world affects the lifespan of a musical?

**Rob Mish 11:20**
That’s... It's an interesting question, because when you talk about reinventing a classic, and if you think about it, in America, classic means, you know, could mean something as... going back only to the ’40s, right?

**Ruth Candler 11:39**
Like vintage.

**Rob Mish 11:40**
Yeah. Because the musical is really, you know, didn't really come about until... The book musical didn't really come about until the late ’20s, with "Showboat," and then you have to go all the way to 1943 to get "Oklahoma!". And then it starts... then we start to evolve.

Now, I'll use "My Fair Lady" as an example of how something changed without changing any of the music, any of the dialogue. So in a recent production, a revival of "My Fair Lady" at Lincoln Center, Higgins is sitting there... he actually is standing there in his lab, which looks mainly more like a drawing room, actually, and Eliza comes back in. And he does... She says the "I washed my face and hands, I did," and he says, "Eliza, where the devil are my slippers?" She has a little valise with her. And this Eliza picks up the valise and walks straight downstage down a set of stairs and up through the center of the house through the audience, leaving him onstage alone, where he belongs.

**Ruth Candler 13:02**
[laughter] I like that.

**Rob Mish 13:05**
Well, and it also has become Eliza's play from the beginning. If you think about it, Eliza is the one who goes to him to better herself, rather than he finding her and saying, "Eliza come with me to my house and we'll do this." So it's... This one made it her play all the way through, and Higgins, you know... It's Eliza Doolittle who is at the top of the bill and Henry Higgins is underneath it. Rex Harrison wouldn't have had that, of course. You know, it was going to be Rex Harrison over a 19-year-old Julie Andrews, so...

**Ruth Candler 13:46**
That line that Eliza says, "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain—" I did that horribly, but when he repeats that is sort of what it's supposed to be, I mean, I think that captures that whole essence of, you know, it's in changing it to be Eliza-focused instead of Henry Higgins-focused.

**Rob Mish 14:06**
Right, because she’s accomplished... One of her goals is to do that. And, you know, he has... Later, you know, he takes her, because he thinks that she may have mastered this, and he takes her to the
derby and she has picked a horse that she really likes and once the race starts, she loses the ladylike image and goes right back to the Cockney: "Dover, Dover, get your bloomin' arse a-rolling."

Ruth Candler 14:37
I wonder if that's where "Pretty Woman," if you flash forward and you look at "Pretty Woman" and the polo scene, you know what I'm talking about?

Rob Mish 14:45
Ah.

Ruth Candler 14:45
You know, I wonder if they pulled that from "My Fair Lady." It has kind of the same sense.

Rob Mish 14:50
Could be. And in fact, there is an element... I'm going to use a term here and probably nobody would have ever thought of this in "My Fair Lady," is that there is a slight element of prostitution in this, because once Eliza is at Higgins' home, her father comes there and says, I need you to pay me money for using her.

Ruth Candler 15:02
Wow.

Rob Mish 15:03
And they pay him, you know, a certain amount, you know that... He says I need this much, and they give him more than that, because they really like what they're doing. And when you look at it, again, in today's terms, and you, and all it takes is somebody to kind of point that out: "Watch this."

Ruth Candler 15:40
Yeah, it's cringeworthy.

Rob Mish 15:42
Yeah. Yeah. Here's her father doing that. And he's a scoundrel, anyway, but that's pretty big. Now, I will say that Shaw was very interested in and passionate about the social climate. He was concerned about women who had to sell themselves in order to make it in the world. He's, he... Several of the themes in his plays dealt with that. And he was very aware of the class structure.

So all of those things, many of those things, come together in "Pygmalion" and then into "My Fair Lady," if you think about it. I don't know for sure that Allen J. Lerner and the people that, and Frederick Lowe, in putting that together even thought about that. But it is interesting.

Ruth Candler 16:35
Yeah, it is. Worth looking into.
You’ve said that while growing up, you listened to your records of musicals so often that you wore them out. When I heard that, I was reminded of Lin Manuel Maranda’s statement that vastly more people had listened to the "Hamilton" soundtrack online than could ever attend the show in person, and that until a videotaped recording of the show became available, the soundtrack in effect was the show for most of the show's fans. Do you think modern distribution channels have changed the way people respond to musicals?

Rob Mish 17:11
Well, yes, but again, that's nothing new. In the '50s, in fact, before Elvis Presley and the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones came along, the Top 40 were songs from musicals that would play on radio and be presented. The Ed Sullivan Show had scenes from musicals on it often. And then, once things like what we would call the British Invasion came along and pushed those things off of the charts, and they became the bestsellers, if you will, people would not listen to musicals much anymore.

Plays, musicals, New York, Broadway, those things have always been in the elite echelon. How many people can actually afford, even then, to go to the theater? Particularly now in New York, it's, you know, you're thinking the cost of a ticket, a regular ticket, can be $250, not to mention what the basic scalping idea for "Hamilton" and other shows up there. It makes it unavailable for many, many people.

Ruth Candler 18:29
Yeah, it's really expensive.

Rob Mish 18:31
Yeah, it really is. And one of the things that has gone on this year with the pandemic, that is... I've been able to save much more money since I haven't been able to... But, and think about it, back in the day, the only time people would ever hear those is on the radio, or if they bought the record, or if they had the sheet music and were able to do that. And even now that is pretty much the case because they can't get there. And so they... And regional companies, there's a lot less touring of shows out of New York and around the country, so that the way that they hear about those is from what they've heard on a record. I...

When "Hamilton" came out, I know that almost every student that I had — I was teaching a musical theater course at the time — every single one of them knew every word from that show. And they hadn't seen it. But they had practically memorized the soundtrack, the cast album, and it's long, it's long. And I found that very interesting and frustrating a little bit because I'm going, "Will they just stop this?" I hadn't seen it yet, so I was a little jealous myself. But then I had to think, "That's exactly what you did. Back when you were a little kid and drove your parents crazy with that kind of stuff."

Ruth Candler 20:00
But with a record player instead.

Rob Mish 20:02
But with a record player.
Instead of iTunes!

Exactly.

Well, and I've heard, too, that that's how some people got to... Some people understood the play, was by memorizing the words first, because it was very hard to be in the moment and listen to the words and understand what they were saying.

That's right. If they paid attention to the lyrics. So often, when you're hearing it, you're hearing... in your head, you're hearing the music first. And then you have to change that perspective to listening to the lyrics, which, in my mind, the lyrics are the heart.

But if you think about songs that were covered, say from "Pal Joey," for instance. Frank Sinatra made a fortune covering songs from that musical. "If I Could Write a Book," "Bewitched," "The Lady is a Tramp," which appeared in the film, people knew those songs because they were played on the radio, not necessarily because they... Most of them didn't have a clue that they were from a musical.

Let's focus now a little more on theater at W&L. Your Total Theater Spring Term course is a very popular one with students. I love the idea that students get the entire theater experience during this time. Would you share with our listeners what happens in this course? And what being an active participant in every aspect of a production teaches our students?

My experience with Total Theater goes all the way back to when I was a student, when that course... the concept of that course was maybe five or six years old at that point. We're talking the Spring Terms of 1975 and '76, when I was able to... when majors could actually take it twice. And we were in a six-week term.

So the idea was to... That was the course that you took, a six-credit course. And a production would be staged during that six weeks, and you had the... You had a company made up of the students who were, in fact, in those plays. The idea of Total Theater actually comes from... Wagner used the term Gesamtkunstwerk, which means total art, all art, and the idea of all of those arts coming together to make a production, from design, from the script, from the actors and so forth coming together to make a full production. And so that was the idea.

My favorite was always the... my junior year when our Total Theater project was to do "Othello" and "The Tempest" in rep. And we were using the Little Troubadour Theatre, which is now a hair salon. And for some reason... and it's springtime, lacrosse, all of that kind of stuff, beautiful weather in Lexington.
And we're rehearsing "The Tempest" in the morning. We all built the sets. We marketed the shows, and then rehearsed "Othello" at night. So we are in that theater for more than 12 hours a day.

And that was the... that's the impressive part, I guess, not able to go out and see a lacrosse game or do any of that thing. But we still had an amazing academic, although we weren't thinking academic, but we were having to learn lines for two Shakespearean plays. Those of us... I was the stage manager, assistant director for "Othello." So I was having to run everything backstage for that production. I was in "The Tempest." We had created a children's version of "The Tempest," which we took around to elementary schools during the early mornings, before these things even opened, and there was a wonderful lady whose husband taught at VMI. And she had this ramshackle old Army truck that we'd get in the back of and she'd drive us all over, bouncing over the Rockbridge County roads.

So that... Total Theater evolved over the years. They even set up one... At one six-week they set up Henry Street Playhouse, which was a summer stock theater, they set that up in the Spring Term, and it continued almost up to the present. When we started doing the Bentley Musical, which was an endowed musical from Betty and Robert Bentley, and those musicals were having to be presented during Spring Term, that was the best time to get the Music Department and the Theater Department together to do a musical, at that point, Total Theater ceased to exist in practice. It was always on in the catalog.

And then, a couple of years ago, I was talking... I was sitting at, you know, after a rehearsal or a show, and I was talking to the students in that show. And I was telling them, you know, about this experience with Shakespeare, and they're going, "Can we do that again? Can we get back into that as well? You know, if there's interest?" Sure, I'd love to do that.

So we started again, and the first one was a series of four one-acts. And we did that. Then there was... And they did all of the things, some of them assistant directed the one-acts, they did the marketing, they put together simple sets and things like that. The next year, we did a full play called "The House of Yes." Then this past spring, when we had to go into virtual type of things, we did a production of Yasmina Reza's "God of Carnage," all virtually. So it gives the students who are involved the experience of every single aspect of a play. And they... there's a responsibility placed on them to make sure that, to have a successful production, that they learn those aspects, whether they're familiar with them or not, and put them into practice.

Ruth Candler 26:50
You're also an alumnus of W&L. During your days as a student, you were, not surprisingly, involved in theater. Would you share what initially drew you to W&L, and then what drew you to theater?

Rob Mish 27:04
Well, that's an easy question. I'm from... I'm the... I'm the townie of townies. And, I mean, I was born in Lexington, I went to elementary school and high school in Lexington, and then went to W&L, and I went to W&L basically because my father said, who was also an alum, "This is where... You're going to apply here, and you're going to apply here early decision." I went, "Okay."
And the days of... that... where you're applying to 25 schools, that was not at all the case. Plus, he knew that — there were some stipulations, but if someone from Rockbridge County went to Washington and Lee, the tuition was practically nothing. It was around $1,100 a year compared to what everybody else was paying. And there were some things that you couldn't do, like live in a dorm, and that was a big deal for freshman year. But that's how I got attracted to Washington and Lee, if you want to put it in those terms.

**Ruth Candler** 28:08
And then what drew you to theater?

**Rob Mish** 28:10
I had always wanted to do that. I was told that I should probably major in premed. That lasted about five minutes. So I didn't start theater at W&L. I had done theater in high school and all before it. I had done little plays when I was a kid for my parents' cocktail parties, which again, they were... they were not as amused as some of their guests were.

But I didn't do a play at W&L until my sophomore year. And that's when I started taking an acting course and scene design courses and that type of thing. So being drawn to theater was something that I... it always had been in my brain and my blood, I guess, and... because once you catch that bug, that bug is going to be with you. You can't get rid of it. And no matter what, where you end up in the business of theater, there are many people who aren't going to... are going to decide not to be an actor or a director or a designer, but they've got a business sense, so they'll go into entertainment law, or something like that. Casting, for example, leaders in that part of it.

**Ruth Candler** 29:26
But once you've got the bug, you've got the bug.

**Rob Mish** 29:28
You do. You do.

**Ruth Candler** 29:30
So, stepping away from the stage for a bit, let's talk about your other involvement with W&L. You also served as a director of alumni engagement for a number of years, and one of the many things that you did during that time was to take student a capella groups around the country to alumni chapter gatherings. In that way you were able to continue your passion of music. Why was that important to you? And what do you think students and alumni gained from those interactions?

**Rob Mish** 29:58
Again, that was not my idea. Dick Sessoms had come up with that idea when he was alumni director, because he knew that putting students together with alumni was such a strong, powerful image and quite effective. When alums hear from one of us, for example, they are not totally sure as to how sincere or how accurate our answers are going to be. There may be some spin on it.
But when they ask a student what's going on at Washington and Lee, they pretty much know that they're going to get an honest, frank answer. So Dick had taken the a capella groups around the country to various alumni chapters and had found that that, indeed, was the case. So when I got on board, and Jim Farrar and I were putting together these tours, he was going to... We were going to split it. He was going to take the first — because if we do it, we would do it during February break, a full week — he was going to take the first couple of days, and then I was going to finish it up.

He ended up not being able to go on the first one, so I went on this whole weeklong trip with these kids, and it was amazing. They had the best time on the bus. We would... I think that one we took off from... Our first was Charleston, West Virginia, and we circled as far as Texas, and came back out. Yeah, through Raleigh. That was our last one. But what... Everything that Dick said about this alumni-student interaction was absolutely true. And they still do that, to a certain extent, today, because when the choirs travel, they do these alumni programs. So it's not the a capella groups anymore, it's the choirs.

Ruth Candler 31:49
That sounds fun. Sounds like a lot of fun.

Rob Mish 31:52
It is, it is. A lot of work in setting up —

Ruth Candler 31:54
Oh, I'm sure!

Rob Mish 31:54
Because they would also stay... they would always... they would actually stay with host families.

Ruth Candler 32:00
So if you've listened to previous episodes of our podcast, you'll know that we often end the podcast with what we call our lightning round.

Rob Mish 32:08
Uh-oh.

Ruth Candler 32:08
If you're game, I'm going to switch things up a little bit. I have a challenge for you.

Rob Mish 32:16
We'll see, we'll see.

Ruth Candler 32:18
I live in a multigenerational household...

Rob Mish 32:20
These aren't yes or no questions that I'm going to be held to, like in a courtroom or something?
No, they are not. No, no, no, not at all. Not at all. I live in a multigenerational household, so I'm going to ask you for your recommendations of favorite musicals for different life stages. And if you're able, I'd like you to provide a one-sentence description of why. Are you ready?

Sure.

Okay. Give a recommendation for a musical for young children.

All right. First of all, I have to say that when people ask me about favorite musicals and that type of thing, even recommendations, I hesitate, because if I tell them the wrong thing, and they don't like it, then it comes back to me. Right. Okay.

We'll put a disclaimer in the podcast episode notes for you.

Now, my first thought when you asked me that question was, you know, was "Okay, for children, musicals that are based on fairy tales." For example, "Into the Woods," Stephen Sondheim's musical, is based on fairy tales. At least the first act is, so if you can find a production, if kids could find a production of "Into the Woods" that only does the first act, they'd be enthralled. The second act gets very dark, where he does the actual stories from Grimm. And so they get... the Cinderella story gets bloody.

And so you don't want to do that. But there is a kids' version of "Into the Woods" that only does the first act, and they can produce it. There are some, you know, I haven't seen them, but like, SpongeBob SquarePants... I have to have a think about that. I'm not sure...

As a musical?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. It was very successful. You know, the whole, I'm gonna... I don't know that I... In fact, I don't even know what a SpongeBob is. I guess he's a sponge. And I understand that he's rectangular. He's not like a...
Yeah. But that brought kids to New York. Their parents would bring them to that show, whether the parents, you know, enjoyed it or not, I don't know, but kids did. So that is...

*Ruth Candler* 34:35
A good introduction, then.

*Rob Mish* 34:37
Absolutely. Yeah.

*Ruth Candler* 34:38
Alright, how about a recommendation for a musical that teens would enjoy?

*Rob Mish* 34:42
Okay, so I go back to — into my generation, I suppose — where the one that teens enjoyed then was "Bye Bye Birdie," which involved a sort of Elvis story where there's a pop star who is like the heartthrob and all of the teenagers are enthralled with him and in love with him. He's going off to war. It's Elvis, right? So that was another one that was very popular with teenagers.

*Ruth Candler* 35:16
What about current-day teenagers?

*Rob Mish* 35:17
Yeah. Today, you know, what the one was that they did... that they liked to go see was "Mean Girls." And Tina Fey had quite a bit to do... She wrote it, and had quite a bit to do with that. There are others, too, that are... they... we would call them "jukebox musicals," where they would take a popular star and put together a show using that star's music and hits with a book about their life, and do that. And those tend to be very popular with teens, as well.

*Ruth Candler* 35:52
All right, can you give a recommendation for the person who says they don't enjoy musical theater, yet you know that they would if they only saw this one production?

*Rob Mish* 36:03
Alright. My, my... Again, I have to go with my first instinct, which is what a lightning round is all about.

*Ruth Candler* 36:09
Yep, yep, yes, it is!

*Rob Mish* 36:11
I was in a theater back in 1984-85. And the show was "La Cage aux Folles," which is a Jerry Herman musical. Jerry Herman wrote "Hello, Dolly" and "Mame." And "La Cage aux Folles" was getting a lot of press, mainly because it was the first musical about gay life that made money — that made a lot of money, winning Tonys all over the place.
And I was... I was standing, I was sitting in back of this older couple, because it was 1985 and I was not yet in that category, and he was saying, the man was saying to his wife, "Why'd you bring me to this play about these people?" and all this kind of stuff. "I'm gonna hate this, and you...," y'know. And she goes, "I don't know, but it was, you know, we had cheap... They gave us cheap seats at tkts." Let me tell you, by the end of that play, because there’s a rousing kind of — not sing along, but let's get clapping and all this kind of stuff — he was enjoying this thing more than anybody else in that theater.

**Ruth Candler** 37:18
Oh, what a great story.

**Rob Mish** 37:19
Yeah. And I'm sure that it was, like, she didn't have to do much talking him into anything else after that.

**Ruth Candler** 37:25
Oh, that's so wonderful. Great recommendations, thank you. For our listeners, we'll include these in our episode notes. So this may be putting you on the spot, but I'm going to ask anyway: What is the best show you have ever seen at W&L?

**Rob Mish** 37:41
Okay, that is putting me on the spot. Because no matter what I say, I'm going to tick off somebody, you know, and particularly those who are currently my colleagues. And then what I have to think about — and I know I'm going on about this — what I have to think about is what best means. Does it mean how, technically, it was put together? How slick it looks? Is it the acting? Is it the directing? Is it the script? Or is it how it affected me? And I think that's how I'm going to answer this question.

When "Spamalot" came out on Broadway, I did not see it. Because I was not going to pay all that money to see Monty Python, and knowing that I was going to have to be in the right mood to watch a Monty Python show. When we did "Spamalot" here, it was directed by Jemma Levy. And, of course I went. I have never laughed so much in my life and was, you know, totally thrilled to be in the audience for that, to watch all of these people engaged in a very healthy way in watching this... in watching that musical.

**Ruth Candler** 38:57
Oh, that's wonderful. Was that filmed, do you know? Did they tape it?

**Rob Mish** 39:01
I doubt it. Technically, you know, you're not allowed to do that. Oh, I didn't know that! You can do it for archival purposes. But, you know, like, if people want to come in and tape it, you know, "My parents want to see it and they couldn't be here, and can I do that?" It... There are all kinds of things in contracts for any play where you're not allowed to do that, because...

**Ruth Candler** 39:20
Oh, that's interesting.
Rob Mish  39:21
You're not paying that kind of royalty.

Ruth Candler  39:24
Okay, what is the best place outside Washington and Lee to see a play within a few hours of Lexington? And if time or expense were no issue, where else would you go?

Rob Mish  39:35
Well, if time or price weren't an issue, then New York. There are many regional theaters around the country that are excellent. But seeing what is coming out, what is top-notch, even though you're paying a lot of money to see it, New York is the place to go. It's still the center of the theater world. For something close by, though, Blackfriars by far is the place to see something. Not just for the theater — the Blackfriars recreation of that theater... But the kind of work that they do there, and... because it's very different than anything else that you would ever see.

Ruth Candler  40:07
It's beautiful, yeah. Well, finally, we cannot forget that you have also acted in several musicals. If you had the chance to perform in a musical production today, what role would you love to play?

Rob Mish  40:27
Okay, that's easy. My senior year at W&L, we did... W&L had never done a musical before, and Al Gordon, who had come on as a faculty member the year before, decided he was going to do a musical. And it was 1976, so it was the 200th anniversary... It was the bicentennial of the country. And so "1776" was the musical that was hot at that point. I got to play John Adams in that production. It was one of the greatest experiences I've ever had. I think I've had other experiences since then, you know, over the past, yikes, 40-plus years, that come close, but that was one of the first ones.

So that's what... That's... That is the basis for the answer, a real answer to this question. So this many years later, I would love to play Benjamin Franklin in that musical. I am old enough. I'm old enough to do that. And I'm not quite as old as he was at that point, but certainly, it would work.

Ruth Candler  41:34
Rob, thank you so much for joining us today. I've had such a great time talking with you.

Rob Mish  41:39
Ruth, thank you. It's my pleasure.

Ruth Candler  41:43
And thanks as always to you for listening. We hope you've discovered something new. To read more about today's podcast and check out other ways to continue your lifelong learning with W&L, you can visit our website, wlu.edu/lifelong, where you'll find our previously recorded webinar series on prejudice, discrimination and antiracism and also information on how to join our winter series, "Truth, Opinion, and the News Media." We hope you'll join us back here soon. Thanks again, and until then, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.