



wild about MUSIC

BY EUGENE YIGA



Matthew Wild, voted as one of 2012's top 200 young South Africans by the Mail & Guardian, is a man of many interests. Eugene Yiga spoke to him to find out more.

Born and raised in the Mother City (and a Drama and English graduate from the University of Cape Town), Matthew Wild enjoys listening to music and looking at art and photography books for inspiration for future projects. He's also passionate about travel and grabs the opportunity to go somewhere new whenever he can.

"I was pretty sure that I wanted to do something creative from a young age," he recalls. "But I was almost equally interested in literature, fine art and music, and I went through a long list of prospective careers before I hit my mid-teens and started to think that I might be able to bring these interests together by becoming a theatre director."

Wild, recently appointed Artistic Director of Cape Town Opera, admits that he's been a "massive opera geek" since his early teens.

This year will see him directing two productions: *The Flying Dutchman* (17 to 26 August) and *The Magic Flute* (23 November to 10 December).

"It's hard to explain exactly why I love it so much, but for me, the great operas of Mozart and Wagner and Verdi and Strauss contain an overwhelming beauty, power, and profundity which nothing else can equal," he says. "For directors, opera brings huge challenges – you're generally working in a foreign language, you have huge forces to marshal, and balancing the dramatic and musical elements is always a tough act. But operas give you a large canvas on which you can be unorthodox, creative and bold, which appeals to me a lot."

Wild had his musical directing debut with *The Rocky Horror Show*. At first, he wasn't at all sure that he was the right person for the job. But he'd wanted to take on a musical for a long time, and the more he worked on the piece, the more he realised what a genius score it has, and how cleverly it's constructed for the stage.

"Penny Simpson (who designed the costumes) and I felt somewhat trapped by the traditional iconography of the *Rocky Horror* brand for a while," she says. "And for every costume element we tried to come up with something that was our own, but which didn't depart too radically from the look which the audience expected. We must have tried 10 different hairstyles for Frank'nFurter before we found one we liked!"

The audience clearly liked it too, given that the production played almost 450 shows in Cape Town and Johannesburg. But what made it so successful?

"You could write a book of guesswork on how *Rocky Horror* turned into the global phenomenon that it now is, and there are so many people in South Africa who hold this musical dear to their hearts," he says. "Given the in-built popularity of the piece, some producers would be content throwing together a cheap-and-nasty staging. But the Fugard Theatre was determined that their production would have high production values and a first-rate cast."

His success on this production is the reason the Fugard Theatre had him directing two more: *Cabaret* and *West Side Story*. His latest will be *Funny Girl*, a semi-biographical musical based on the life and career of Broadway star, film actress, and comedienne Fanny Brice.

This musical tells the fascinating and bittersweet story of Fanny Brice whose vocal talents and comedic ability see her rise from a Brooklyn music hall singer to Broadway star, and her tempestuous relationship with gambler Nicky Arnstein.

 **CONTINUES TO**
PAGE 28



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The original book was written by Isobel Lennart, with music composed by Jule Styne and lyrics written by Bob Merrill. It features some of the most iconic songs in film and theatre history, including "People" and "Don't Rain On My Parade".

Funny Girl was Barbra Streisand's big breakthrough when she played the lead role in the original production, which opened on Broadway on 26 March 1964 at the Winter Garden Theatre. (It enjoyed a recent sold-out revival season on the West End at the Savoy Theatre.) It was nominated for eight Tony Awards and the cast recording was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2004. A film adaptation of the musical was released in 1968 starring Streisand (who won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance, as well as the Golden Globe) alongside Omar Sharif.

Wild's wish list for the opera productions he'd like to direct is much longer than that for musicals, but he'd like to tackle Sweeney Todd and Candide at some point in the future. And yet his current string of success hasn't made him forget the challenges he's had along the way.

He wasn't accepted into drama school when he auditioned at the age of 18, and had to come back a year later to try again. Then, at the start of his professional career, he had a big success with his debut production but his second was critically panned and a box office flop. This dented his confidence for a long time.

"You need to be resilient (and preferably thick-skinned) to work in this industry, especially if you work on large-scale productions," he says. "I was pretty sensitive in my early twenties, and it took me a while to toughen up enough to enjoy being at the helm of a large production."

Wild describes himself as a naturally stubborn person who loves what he does, which motivates him to give something another try if he doesn't get it right the first time. He also believes in keeping his head down and concentrating on the work at hand rather than dwelling on his mistakes or other people's opinions.



“Over time, I’ve come to believe that occasional flops are inevitable and healthy for directors,” he says. “There’s nothing like a run of successes to make you terrified of failure, which isn’t good for creativity. And they’re a good reminder that at the end of the day, it’s only theatre, not open-heart surgery.”

FUNNY GIRL IS AT THE FUGARD THEATRE IN CAPE TOWN FROM 18 APRIL.
BOOK AT COMPUTICKET OR WWW.THEFUGARD.COM.

