

Cultural Daily

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Bring On The Chocolates

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, September 16th, 2020

Two shy people. A spark of attraction. Will they get together? In the dance-filled musical *Romantics Anonymous*, the answer is—chocolate! This gentle, joyous rom-com won British theater awards and in March was scheduled to launch its U.S. tour at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills. Then the pandemic shut down all live performance here and in Britain.

Six months later, that U.S. tour is back on, sort of, with a live performance of the musical streamed to benefit the U.S. theaters scheduled for the tour, including the Wallis. Streamed live from London's Bristol Old Vic Theatre on Sat., Sept. 26 at 1 p.m. (PDT), ticketholders will receive a password to watch on their smart tv, laptop or other device from the comfort of their own home. Tickets are through the Wallis, but handled by a British ticket company so ticket prices are listed in pounds with approximate U.S. dollar exchange rate (see below for more ticket price info).



Romantics Anonymous. Photo by Steve Tanner.

The dance-filled musical reunites choreographer Etta Murfitt with director/playwright Emma Rice to tell the tale of Angélique (Carly Bawden) and Jean-René (Marc Antolin). Angélique makes chocolates infused with the emotions she otherwise can't express and attends a self-help group. Jean-René (Marc Antolin) manages a chocolate factory but walls up his emotions and himself in his office listening to self-help tapes. Will they find each other? Of course. Will the road be bumpy and awkward? Of course. Will they dance and sing to an ending as sweetly satisfying as one of Angélique's fine chocolates? You betcha!

As the Wise Children production made final preparations for the live streamed performance, choreographer Murfitt took time to respond to questions about the musical and changes from the original staging in the round.

"Some of the numbers were re-choreographed to suit a proscenium stage and a bigger stage, and because some songs were changed, the choreography for those scenes had to change as well. The wonderful thing about revisting a show, is that you can improve and make sure the story and the choreography work well for the show," Murfitt explained. "I love looking at the existing choreography and asking myself is it the best it can be for this present production? Am I using the skills of the current cast in the best way? Could I do more? Or should I do less? As a director, Emma loves choreography and always has a vision of what she wants, and I bring that to life – we have a similar sensibility and enjoy bringing scenes to life."



Romantics Anonymous production photos

As the Francophone names suggest, this is a theatrical reworking of a 2010 French-Belgian film *Les Émotifs Anonymes*. Rice kept the architecture of the film's story, drew on music by Michael Kooman and lyrics by Christopher Diamond, and with Murfitt's choreography reshaped the story for live theater.

Murfitt noted there are the musical numbers where the choreography reflects the songs and the story but also the movement language that sets up the French flare, the cheekiness of the characters and the flow of scenes – all this addressed in rehearsals to make it run seamlessly.

The show has been described as being about chocolate, love and anxiety, a description Murfitt thinks is apt and explained how the anxiety element has been built into the choreography and direction.

“The actors all had to come up with gestures that showed obsessive behaviour or nervousness. This movement was put into a dance that captures their anxiety. All of the cast can move and enjoy moving – so it's honestly a joy to work with them. The choreography is so integral in Emma's work that any actor who works with Emma knows they will be dancing a lot through the show and some of their ideas, often quite brilliant, became part of the choreography,” Murfitt offered. While she denies having a favorite dance, she admitted that she loves the car chase and the song ‘Wings.’”



Carley Barden in *Romantics Anonymous*. Photo by Steve Tanner.

Except for Bawden and Antolin in the central roles, the rest of the seven member cast shapeshift into multiple characters at the drop of dance step. The polished result garnered Outstanding Contribution to British Theatre at the 2019 UK Theatre Awards.

Taking a page from the National Basketball League, company members have been isolating together in one large bubble. By reuniting most of the original cast and with the isolation, the goal is to safely perform the show in its original award-winning form, including that inevitable, long-awaited kiss. The extraordinary steps taken to ensure the participants' safety is a hopeful sign that with such precautions, undertaken with financial support from the British government, live theater can return with caution and self-quarantine.



Romantics Anonymous. Photo by Steve Tanner.

Asked about insights gained in preparing a live performance for a streamed event, Murfitt admitted it was strange experiencing the company rehearse on zoom. She described how the company approached giving a live performance without an audience during a worldwide pandemic.

“I think it is best to just do the show as if there was a live audience in the house. You still feel the energy of the cast and the joy of the production. Certain moments can be highlighted more with a streamed production, but it's great to see the show as it would be seen if you were you in the theatre,” she said. As to the pandemic, Murfitt thinks the show lets an audience be transported to a world of wonder and delight. “And chocolate always takes your mind off of our current situation,” she added.

Murfitt has almost a dozen collaborations helmed by Rice and her company *Wise Children*. Known for her storytelling abilities, Rice's productions have been praised for the use of Murfitt's dance moves to create a seamless transition between scenes and casts switching among multiple characters.

In addition to her association with Rice, Murfitt's credits include time as Associate Director and performer with Matthew Bourne's company *New Adventures* including productions of *Car Man*, *Swan Lake*, *Edward Scissorhands*. In September 2017, Murfitt was seen onstage here in the LA production of Bourne's *The Red Shoes*.



Romantics Anonymous' Etta Murfitt. Photo courtesy of Wise Children Productions.

Perhaps a coincidence, maybe not, but in a happy tie-in this live *Romantics Anonymous*' performance comes on international Chocolate Day. The show's lovely coup de grace where the exiting audience received chocolates simply can't happen With the audience at the other end of the live stream. Still after purchasing a ticket, one could stock up at See's which also hands out a sample to its visitors or perhaps just a Hersey's kiss..

Romantics Anonymous Wise Children Productions with the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts; Sat., Sept. 26, 1 p.m. PDT. Tickets purchased or before September 19 are 15 British pounds (\$19.65 + \$1.31 processing fee = \$20.96 US, based on current exchange rates); after September 20 they are 20 British pounds (\$26.20 + \$1.31 processing fee = \$27.51 US. Ticket sales are being handled by the Ticket Co. in UK, so prices are in British pounds, but credit cards will be charged in US dollars. Some exchange rates may apply. For tickets and information, visit [The Wallis](#) or call 310.746.4000 (Tue.-Fri. 9:30 am – 2:30 pm).

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