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*David Leidholdt of Millbrook Playhouse is interviewed by
PA Wilds Ambassador Ellen Matis of Hello Social Co.*

Ellen: Hey there, and welcome to the next episode in the Wilds Are Working series. My name is Ellen Matis and I'm the owner of Hello Social and I'm a PA Wilds ambassador. Today, I'm talking on behalf of the PA World Center, interviewing David Leidholdt of the Millbrook Playhouse in Mill Hall. So David is going to share how their organization has pivoted in the last few months, many months, in what is pretty much an uncharted time for businesses and organizations. So welcome, David.

David: Hi, how you doing?

Ellen: Great. Thanks for coming on.

David: Well, thanks for having me. I'm glad we made it happen.

Ellen: So just to get started, tell us about what the Millbrook Playhouse is and a little bit of a history, too.

David: Great. Well, Millbrook Playhouse is what we consider summer stock theater. So it kind of hearkens back to the days of the 60s and the 70s, even earlier, when actors would travel around and do stock. So it's kind of the old Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, somebody had a bar and let's put on a show. It started in 1963. And it was an old dairy farm which kind of sat empty for a little while. And Dan Reinhold, who owned the house across the street, got some people together. They did a couple artist shows and play readings. And then they started slowly but surely turning it into a full fledged theater. They hired people from out of town and all that. So 1963 was the first season. And we have been producing, not me specifically, but the company has been producing for -- this would have been our 57th full season. There was one year in the early 90s [where] they went dark because of financial reasons, but they recouped and went [on]. And this would have been ongoing; this is the only second summer we're not doing a full summer season, although we do have some plans still in the works, hopefully.... So that's its history. It's been going and it's cultivated and changed and grown and the area has grown. But we're still kind of in that traditional theater model. We hire most of our staff from all over the country. We bring in actors from New York, Philadelphia, you know, lots of college kids that come in. And

then we also, you know, [include] local people, local kids; there's a lot of people that have started their careers that have moved on to New York, have done professional work in the area. And this is my seventh season as artistic director. I was going into my seventh year, and I kind of moved up here full time. I work a little bit at the Lock Haven University helping there, so I'm totally involved.

Ellen: Gotcha. That's awesome. So why do you think that a playhouse like this is important to the Mill Hall community? And then why is it a good fit for the PA Wilds region?

David: Well... Arts and performing arts specifically have been my whole background my whole life. I discovered it in my high school days and literally couldn't personally think of anything else that I'd rather do as I moved to New York in the early 90s. I lived there for twenty five years. I actually worked at Millbrook Playhouse kind of in the early 2000s as a freelancer in New York. And, you know, the regional theaters, we consider this a regional summer stock theater, and they're important just to kind of introduce the arts.... There's the entertainment value, there's the economic impact.... Outside of ticket prices alone, theaters have an impact. Every person spends \$33 on top of every ticket price on average in the community. And that, you know, plays out in restaurants and shopping and all of that side stuff. So there's a great economic impact for theaters, I think, so that's important. The arts in general, they're great ways to talk to social issues. There's great ways to entertain, bring people together, build community. And I always say, coming in from the outside, so to speak, seven years ago, it was like after so many years in New York City and elsewhere, it's like this is a remarkable thing to have in the PA Wilds. It's not kind of your typical thing. You know, there's a lot of canoeing and hunting and ATV and all that stuff. So to have a live professional theater that's almost 60 years old is truly a remarkable thing because it's a very challenging business model, the theater. So it takes a lot of money to run it. There's a little money you spend on it. So to have that still happen and have that in the community, I think it's great. Every year we have a senior couple that come in and they've been here since year one. They've been coming for 58 years of seeing live theater. And that doesn't happen everywhere, especially in smaller rural towns. So that's kind of a lot of reasons. But just then I love it because I love what we do here. I think the shows are great. The people come into the local community, then the outside community. It's kind of one of the most unique things up here is that it's like we bring in this contingency of young professionals, mostly a lot of people starting their career. Several people that have worked here through my years have made it on to Broadway and television, so it's a great launching point. And then also, it's like you said, we have a lot of youth programs and stuff like that. And we just enjoy bringing those people the live theater experience.

Ellen: Yeah, for sure. Actually, I had never heard those stats before on the economic impact.

David: There's an Arts and Economic Impact study that they do every year now. Obviously, like the \$33 is always based on ... a national survey. But, you know... Because we're not in a downtown area. We don't have that kind of foot traffic. But like generally, if, you know, people get to the theater early, they always do dinner, they pay babysitters, a lot of bigger cities [have paid] parking. So it really trickles down. You know, it keeps cities thriving. It adds a different value to your to your local economy and an aesthetic in your local feel.

Ellen: Year! That's super interesting. So obviously, mid-March, late March, you would have had to shut down the playhouse. Tell me a little bit about what happened within the playhouse amid shut down and kind of what's happening now many months later.

David: Well, it was interesting... I was in New York City at the beginning of March. So like I said, we hire from all over. We go into New York City and Philadelphia, plus the local area, and audition for the season. So it's a big thing. I go down for a week. We will see 200-400 people audition. I got there and, like, two days later they were shutting [down]. You know, everybody started talking about it and building. And it was like, is this going to happen? Is this for real? And I was walking around. I had coffee with a friend. And I said, 'well, they shut down Broadway, maybe we're gonna have to cancel auditions.' And that day, that coffee, they're like, they're shutting down Broadway. And that's huge. You know, again, that's New York City. That is, you know, one of the biggest economic drivers there as well. So I kind of like sped through, cancelled auditions, headed back upstate here up to Pennsylvania and just kind of was like, 'OK, so what are we going to do?' Reached out and then go slowly but surely it became aware, as we went along, every theater, every kind of large organization started postponing. I have several friends who are artistic directors. Seth Sponhouse, who runs the community theater in Williamsport and I chatted. I have a friend who runs a similar theater upstate New York. And we just [ask], 'what are you doing? What are you doing?' And like a lot of online communication. And with the board, we sat down, we made maybe four versions of the season. Like, if we open later, if we cut the shows in half, if we do that. And then finally, our business manager, David Gratzner, he's just like, 'I think we just move it. We pick it up, we move it and to '21 and we cancel this season.' And that made the most sense to kind of do.... There was no way to do it the way we normally do it.

Ellen: Yes. So, you know, at this point then, since things are loosening up a little bit, are you offering any programs or are you still trying to figure those things out?

David: We are going to offer some programs.... You know, when we first announced it, we were like still, again, a little more optimistic that we'd be like, 'OK, we're gonna be out of this,' and we're still optimistic. You know, every day is a different day and the numbers keep changing. We're either in the second wave or the first wave. How's that? You know, luckily, we've been doing a good job here in Pennsylvania and a good job locally, and so we think we're going to be able to start offering some things. So as of right now, we're going to announce this week that we're going to offer some of our theater camps. So we have always done our theater education program. And I've talked to a lot of our board members, our parents. And I've asked them, I'm like, 'how do you feel about kids going into camps? How do you do that?' And they're all like, 'Get them out, get them out of my hair.' Because we could do virtually but like, who wants to, after three months of sitting on a computer? Nobody in the middle somewhere wants to take online acting classes.

Ellen: Sure.

David: We are hopefully offering what we're calling our kids, juniors and teens, we're gonna do three different camps for like third, fourth, fifth; fifth, sixth, seventh; and then ninth through graduation. And they'll be just smaller groups. We're gonna maintain those as smaller groups, ten to fifteen students, one to two teachers. Usually we're combating here; usually we have two shows running simultaneously, plus our theater camps plus, you know, everything else. It's just been me. So ... It's a lot easier to social distance the groups, keep kids separated. Then we're hopefully still -- one of the programs that was gonna be a one weekend program called

Grand Legends, which was one of our stars from one of our shows last year, was a one person show -- we're going to expand that a little. We're going to offer that the last two weekends in August with, you know, all the changes and requirements within the social media distance... Social media? The social distancing! We need the social media distance, but we can go on and on with that. But with the social distancing and all that. So we're still doing it. I'm you know, I'm afraid to.... There's still that trepidation of, like pulling the plug and announcing that because, you know, theater is such an intimate thing. You are sitting in a small, dark room close to people. And there's people singing. I think we absolutely need it. I think people want stuff to do. I think they want to be entertained, and they want to be around people. We just want to be safe. So safety is the utmost concern, but I think we're gonna tip toe in. You know, we're gonna offer those camps late July. We're gonna look at late August doing that. And if that goes well, then we'll be able to maybe start doing some more stuff in the fall and Christmas time.

Ellen: Sure. So, obviously, you mentioned the social distancing for the camps, but if you decide that you are able to open for four shows and things, what other approaches do you think that you'll take to protect one, your employees, but also visitors to the playhouse?

David: Yeah, I mean, there's a list and, you know, the [Clinton County] Economic Partnership here, and we were on different [lists]; Williamsport and different communities have been sending lots e-mails, and there's restaurant stuff. And there's also some guides through theater resources that talk about what to do. And some are very rigorous and some are a little looser. But, you know, obviously keeping people grouped into seating, that's you know, that's the trial and error, because we sell seats in advance and people go online or they call up and they're like -- you know, our our patrons have been coming here forever -- and they're like, 'I want the south side,' with a seat. So what we're going to do is we're going to sell the tickets as general admission and then once we sell X amount of seats -- so we can put 50 percent in here, so we see 230-ish so we can sell like 120. We're gonna keep it even less, then we're gonna find the groups, and then we're going to set up the groups and make sure they're six feet apart. So that's one step. So we're going to control the seating of it. Then we'll be able to keep people separated downstairs. We'll obviously have all the hand sanitizer and all the face mask requirements and all that. The actors will have to be six feet away from the front row. So I'm going to kind of tape out and paint a detail on the floor. Our theater is interesting because most theaters are what they call proscenium, so much like a frame. You're looking here. We're in we're in a thrust, which means the audience is seated on three sides, which is great and which I love because they're more intimate, but now they're closer. So now we're like, all right, so we're gonna measure from that person's knees, six feet. So so the show will do. We'll be much more simple. It's only going to be two to three people. It's only going to be singing and stuff. So there's not going to be that that concern with trying to get people too close. We're gonna tip toe into this. That's kind of those restrictions, and with the bar and with all that, like, obviously we'll have to take precautions there, and face masks and stuff like that. You know, people are somewhat back to normal. Like I go to my favorite coffee shop, The Avenue 209 -- and if you if you're in Lock Haven, you have to go to the Avenue 209. It's my favorite coffee shop. I love those people. I've been going there a little bit and working, and the people are respectful there. You know, you go to the larger grocery store and some people aren't taking all the precautions. So I think we'll be able to find a really comfortable way with keeping people safe and clean, keeping the place clean, and also be able to enjoy yourself. Nobody wants to walk in and be like, 'oh, my God, you know, I can't touch. This can stay in line.' We don't want to be too regimented with it.

Ellen: Sure. All right. Well, to wrap up here, is there any advice that's helped you along the way or inspiration personally or professionally that has helped you get through this?

David: Well, you know, the community has been great. I have to say that we have artists, like I said, from all over the country that come in here. And because of social media, because of that, we've all been kind of in it together because unfortunately, like, they had the list of the most essential and the least essential. Actors are like, they say, the least essential. But I say... without actors and writers, where would Netflix be? Where would any of your things that helped you get through this pandemic [be]? A lot of them are entertainment driven by the arts. So the artists have been really, you know, there's been outreach with some of the turmoils that are going on in the country. Like everybody seems to; artist are sensitive beings so they always come together and support. And that has been great. So if you go on our social media; I run the social media. I put a lot of flashbacks. You know, I've been paying honor to all the shows and the patrons. So that's been really heartening and helpful. And then just, you know, the board of directors is all community members. The kids, our youth ensemble kids. We did an online show called The Show Must Go Online. Young people can inspire you to do great things because they throw their heart into it. So for me personally, the youth ensemble, the local actors. And I have to say, you know, the [Economic] Partnership has been very helpful. We redid in our website in the middle of this [by] Cross Life Ventures, who I think may be a member of the PA Wilds; Chris and Kate Miller own their own company and they redesigned our entire website during this whole thing. So I want to say those kind of people are inspiring and also helpful to us. So give a shout out if you're listening. Cross Life Ventures. Kate and Andrew. And it's their anniversary, so send them a 'hi!'.

Ellen: All right. Well, if you are watching this and you'd like more information on how to support small businesses in the PA Wilds, make sure to visit WildsCoPA.org. There you're going to find all of the interviews that we've had so far in this series. And also, there's an opportunity to apply to appear on this series, and those applications are still being accepted. So make sure you check that out. And David, thank you so much for your time.

David: Thank you so much for having us. I'm so glad we finally got to talk. And we love being part of this community. And check us out. And we wish you guys all the luck.

Ellen: Absolutely. All right. Let's talk later.

David: All right. Thank you.