

May 4, 2018

**Lewis Center for the Arts’ Programs in Theater and Music Theater present**

***Trailing Rhiannon***

**A new musical play by Princeton senior Emma Watkins interweaves Celtic folk music with storytelling tradition to reimagine one of Welsh mythology's most fiercely outspoken female protagonists**



Photo caption: Princeton senior Emma Watkins during her summer 2017 research trip to Wales to visit the sites and landscapes that figure in the mythological story of Rhiannon

Photo credit: Courtesy of Emma Watkins

What/Who: A new musical play by Princeton senior Emma Watkins that interweaves Celtic folk music with the storytelling tradition that thrives in the windswept hills of Wales to reimagine one of Welsh mythology’s most fiercely outspoken female protagonists. Directed by senior Abigail Jean-Baptiste and presented by Princeton University’s Programs in Theater and Music Theater.

When: Performances on May 10, 11 and 12 at 8:00 p.m. and May 13 at 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

Where: Wallace Theater at the Lewis Arts complex on the Princeton campus

Free and open to the public

(Princeton, NJ) The Lewis Center for the Arts’ Programs in Theater and Music Theater at Princeton University will present *Trailing Rhiannon,* a new musical play written by Princeton senior Emma Watkins that interweaves Celtic folk music with storytelling tradition to reimagine one of Welsh mythology's most fiercely outspoken female protagonists. The production is directed by senior Abigail Jean-Baptiste. Performances will be presented May 10 through 13 at 8:00 p.m. with a matinee on May 13 at 2:00 p.m. in the Wallace Theatre at the Lewis Arts complex on the Princeton campus.

Rhiannon is a major figure in Welsh mythology and the medieval Welsh story collection *Mabinogi*. An Otherworld non-mortal, she refuses the man she was promised to and marries a mortal prince of Wales. She endures tragedy when her newborn child is mysteriously abducted, and she is falsely accused of killing and eating the child. As her penance for this crime she is sentenced to sit at the gate of her husband’s castle and tell her story to travelers and to offer to carry them on her back to the castle.

In writing the new play, Watkins drew from a number of interests and sources. Her father is Welsh and he shared stories from Welsh folklore when Watkins was growing up. As an English major at Princeton, she has studied mythology and folklore, especially female characters and storytellers, as well as the performance of these stories. She has also read a number of recent translations of the Rhiannon myths. In addition to her degree in English, Watkins is pursuing certificates in environmental studies and theater with an interest in how art and environmental advocacy can be powerful allies. She cites inspiration from the noted American musician and soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause. Last spring, she served as dramaturg on the Program in Theater’s main production of the musical *Into the Woods*. These interests all intersect in *Trailing Rhiannon*.

Watkins began working on the play the summer before her junior year with a goal to achieve a production of it as her senior thesis. She received funding through the Lewis Center, the English Department, and the Program in Environmental Studies to conduct research in Wales last summer where she visited historic sites, including those that relate to the Rhiannon myth, photographed the landscape, and taped environmental sounds that are being developed into a soundscape that will run throughout the play.

Jean-Baptiste joined Watkins in proposing *Trailing Rhiannon* as a senior thesis project. She was drawn to the opportunity to collaborate with Watkins in developing a new work and in directing an all-female cast, some of whom will portray male characters in the play. In January she directed her own senior thesis production of *Etched in Skin on a Sunlit Night* by Kara Lee Corthron.

Both women share a love of musical theater and have taken classes with musical theater scholar Stacy Wolf, however they see limitations in classical musical theater, which rarely provides female characters with the degree of agency they would like to see. They hope the use of folk music in *Trailing Rhiannon* grounds the story in the culture in a way that traditional musicals do not. They also share the view that this play represents an expanded view of musical theater that incorporates elements from the genre, a melding with storytelling traditions, and a break from conventions.

Watkins and Jean-Baptiste also studied theatrical design with Tony-nominated lighting designer Jane Cox, who is director of the Program in Theater. Applying their learning in design, they are having actors both create the characters in the play and portray the environment that is so central to the story. The presentational format they chose was performance in the round surrounded by two circles of chairs. They note that the circle is a strong element in storytelling and in creating a sense of community and intimacy, akin to sitting around a campfire, and mirrors a Welsh festival, called the *Eisteddfod,* during which a circle of stones is created as a performance space for poets and musicians.

The all-student cast includes sophomores Hannah Chomiczewski, Kateryn McReynolds, and Allison Spann, and juniors Victoria Davidjohn and Tamia Goodman. Students taking on production roles include Davidjohn as lighting designer, sophomore Hannah Semmelhack as stage manager, sophomore Milan Eldridge as assistant lighting designer, and sophomore Jenny Kim as assistant stage manager.

Music direction is by Vince di Mura, who created the arrangements for the folk music and expanded on Watkins’s transcribed texts; di Mura and Watkins collaborated on creating the soundscape. Musicians joining di Mura include sophomore Andrew Damian (’20) on guitar, senior Evan Gedrich on guitar and mandolin, first-year student Morganna McGrath on viola, junior Julia Mosby on violin, first-year student Asher Muldoon on accordion, and alumnus Douglas Wallack, Class of 2016, on cello.

Watkins’ faculty advisors on the project included Lecturer in Theater and English and Acting Director of the Program in Music Theater R.N. Sandberg in playwriting, opera and music theater composer Randall Eng on music, and Lecturer in English Sarah Anderson on folklore and mythology. Lecturer in Theater Shariffa Ali is Jean-Baptiste’s directing advisor.

A storytelling workshop led by Watkins and Jean-Baptiste will follow select performances.

Watkins has received a Fulbright Scholarship to continue her study of mythology and storytelling next year. She will be pursuing Masters in Welsh and Celtic Studies at Cardiff University. Post-graduation, Jean-Baptiste will be pursuing directing in New York City with a grant from the New York Women’s Foundation Directing Apprenticeship Award.

Admission to *Trailing Rhiannon* is free and open to the public; however seating is limited and will be on a first-come, first-seated basis.

To learn more about this event, the Programs in Theater and Music Theater, and the over 100 performances, exhibitions, readings, screenings, concerts, and lectures presented each year at the Lewis Center, most of them free, visit [arts.princeton.edu](http://www.arts.princeton.edu/).

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