

Reflections from WT with Dr. Andrew Hay

- Randy Ray: All right. You are listening to episode number 40 of Reflections from WT. Number 40. Can you believe we've done 40 of these things?
- President Wendler: No, I can't believe it, Randy. 40 of these things.
- Randy Ray: So yeah, I think we're about to get it down now.
- Dr. Andrew Hay: Maybe.
- Randy Ray: Maybe a little bit. Yeah, I'm excited about today. Yeah, I've been looking forward to today and today's guests, a couple guys I really enjoy talking to and have a lot of respect for. Our guests today are TEXAS Outdoor Musical Artistic Director, Stephen Crandall and Cultural Foundation of Texas Panhandle Executive Director, Dr. Andrew Hay. Welcome. First of all, tell us what you do. Let's start with Dr. Hay.
- Dr. Andrew Hay: I've been tasked with and I have the joy and privilege of overseeing two entities that are under the CFTP banner, Cultural Foundation of the Texas Panhandle. So effectively CFTP is the management of both Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum and TEXAS, the Outdoor Musical, and these two entities which have, combined, about 156 years of operation in this region. And so, incredibly storied institutions, and those two boards entered to an agreement with West Texas A&M to say, "Well, how about we leverage one another and leverage this moment alongside WT to say, how do we promote all the good things of the Texas Panhandle and the state that come through both an artistic expression of the history of this region and also those incredible artifacts that are at the museum?" So I get to help manage that and guide that and give some vision and input into those two entities.
- Randy Ray: How long has it been in existence?
- Dr. Andrew Hay: CFTP?
- Randy Ray: Yeah.
- Dr. Andrew Hay: Gosh, I'm looking at Dr. Wendler. I think January of '21?
- President Wendler: Yeah, yeah.
- Dr. Andrew Hay: Does that that sound right?

President Wendler: It's less than two years. Less than two years. I'm not going to say it's moving at the speed of light, sometimes it feels like glacial speed, but we're making progress with this. And this is going to, as Andrew said, it's going to hone down our edge on how important the values and the culture of West Texas and the Panhandle are to WT and to this place in the Panhandle.

Randy Ray: Was this your idea, Dr. Wendler?

President Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: And how does it tie into WT?

President Wendler: Well, it was, it came-

Randy Ray: How does it tie into WT 125?

President Wendler: Well, it ties in because what I want to see our university do is, without apology, be a regional-serving university. And I don't want that to be read as, "Well, we don't have strong intellect here. We don't have good artistic talent here. We don't have inquisitive people here if we serve this region that's largely agricultural and energy-based and so on and so forth." That really there's life in this region, not just here but in all this constellation of small communities and so on. And I want WT to be reflective of that and responsive to it and do it without apology. I don't want to be in New York. I lived in New York. I don't want to be in San Francisco. I lived in San Francisco. I don't want to be in Houston or Baton Rouge. I've lived in... Austin. I've lived in all these places.

President Wendler: And the fact of the matter is there's something uniquely, really special about West Texas. And if we lose it, if it escapes, if it turns to vapor, it's gone and we'll never get it back. And I don't want that to happen. My hope is, and I think that Andrew and Stephen and others, the boards are all proving this concept, that when we talk about the history of the Panhandle through the artifacts museum, through the performance of the play... And it is a fictionalized history in some ways, but it's also, it's real. It's real. It's what West Texas is.

Dr. Andrew Hay: I think on top of that too, something I love about these two entities that represent this area and maybe the state of Texas overall is they represent the complete unexpected and surprising qualities of the history and the people and what it's taken to live here and continue to live here. And then also with WT 125, I look at the people, and I know Stephen will talk about this, but I look at the cast and crew that come here from all over the nation and world in some extent, and they get to be with us for a time and really help us create something incredible and tell the story of this region. And then at the museum, well I won't get started on the museum too much, but I obsess over the museum and all the incredible artifacts that are not only from the Panhandle to the world, but all the surprising stories from around the region and the state that that collection represents from millennia past.

Randy Ray: Yeah. One of the things that I've always said, and Dr. Wendler's heard me say this, and he says, "I'm trying to fix that," is that I don't believe that WT brags on itself enough. And I think the same thing is true with the museum and with Texas. I don't think we brag enough and I think we need to do a better job of getting the word out.

Randy Ray: Stephen, I'm going to shift over to you. You and I have kind of worked a little bit together over the last several years. You were department head for the Theater Department here at the Sybil B. Harrington Fine Arts College. And recently you shifted over to Artistic Director. Why did you do that? We miss you around here.

President Wendler: He's asking himself the exact, very question some days. "Why did I do this?"

Stephen Crandall: You know, that's a great question. I had been finishing up six years as a department head and-

Randy Ray: Wow, I didn't realize it was that long.

Stephen Crandall: Yeah, six years. So two 3-year terms, is really how I viewed it. It's a difficult job. I certainly enjoyed it and I certainly feel proud of the work that I was able to accomplish in the position, but this opportunity sort of snuck up on me, really, as an artist, as a theater artist and as a director and an actor. The opportunity to potentially transition or shift into something that was more artistically focused, just a little bit more of me, I think, and all that I can offer, it really became this surprising fit. My history with the show I think had a lot to do with that, having performed in it for three summers over 20 years ago.

Stephen Crandall: So all of these factors kind of played into the moment where Andrew and I had a serious conversation about, "Is this something you think you would want to do? And is there a way for us to talk with administration and see if we can make it work?" It just started to feel right and so I jumped at the opportunity to pivot.

Randy Ray: Well, let me ask you this. How have you changed it?

Stephen Crandall: The show?

Randy Ray: The show.

Stephen Crandall: It's a great question. I think, first and foremost, and this is something that Andrew was really keen on motivating when I started considering directing the production, which in and of itself is a pretty big task. The thing that we wanted to focus on, and I think this ties back into even WT 125, was how can we allow the story to really be the central element, that this play is intending to fictionalize a historical period in this region and the struggles and the hardships and the sacrifices that people made to try to tame the land, if you will. And so that's really what my focus was.

Stephen Crandall: And so I started in January really digging into the previous script, as well as multiple scripts from the past 55 years, and started to just piece together what felt like a cohesive and important and engaging story. And of course I was using a lot of my own experience as a director, trying to really ensure that the story is... You can follow it. You can understand it. You're given the information you need to invest in it. And that's really what I've done, I think.

Stephen Crandall: Not to say that the previous iteration of the play or scripts have not done that, but I really felt compelled to focus the story as best as I could on those characters that really did drive the heart of the play, which is the cattlemen, the ranchers and their struggles, and the farmers, the homesteaders and their struggles, and where those two things intersected and how they influenced each other. And then you wrap all of that up in a nice, lovely-

Randy Ray: And then you've got to put in some songs.

Stephen Crandall: romantic story. And then you add some song and some dance.

President Wendler: Singing and dancing!

Stephen Crandall: Yeah, exactly. So it's an interesting form, this play.

Randy Ray: How long's it been around? It was in the '60s, wasn't it? '67?

Stephen Crandall: Yeah, '66 is the first season. And it's performed every summer except for 2020 during COVID. So this is our 56th season.

President Wendler: Let me just tag onto this story. Royal Brantley, who was involved for so many years here and is a legend, really, locally, in theater and drama and all those things... I was given as a birthday present last year a copy of the original program from... One of many, obviously, but somebody had held onto it and somebody bought it online somewhere, eBay or somewhere, I don't know where, but anyway they got it. I was looking in it and lo and behold, I see a picture of about a 10-year-old Royal Brantley.

President Wendler: And Stephen's characterization is just so good. It does capture part of what West Texas is in a very real way. And it can be seen as, oh, I don't know, maybe overly romantic or nostalgic to think about this, but there are kernels of what West Texas is that are critically important today in contemporary society that I feel are in some ways oozing out of the cultural milieu. They're just not the same anymore. I'm not holding onto the past, but there are deeply embedded human principles that guide how we do things. And I think that play captures some of those, just like the museum does. That's what makes these things so important to me. And that's what's so important about WT.

President Wendler: I told somebody once. They said, "You know, but we're a little backward up here." A faculty member told me this. I said, "I don't know." I said, "You give me

two weeks on the Upper West Side of New York, and I'll get 150 people that are willing to pay four times what we're charging for tuition and fees to come here and be in a place like this, because it does have some sort of fabric, a structure, bones, DNA that knit together into something that's viable in contemporary society." And we forget it. And by the way, I tell people, I told new employees yesterday at a meeting, "I really do like this place, but I'm going to tell you we're not perfect." It is not a perfect place. Every place has imperfections, but we're working hard to reinforce those basic tenets of existence that appeal, I think, to all people. When Stephen talks the way he does, it softens my heart because I think that's exactly what we should be doing. Sorry, sorry.

Randy Ray: All right. We're going to take a break. And when we come back, I want to talk about the museum and I want to talk about maybe what the future of the museum is going to look like. We'll be back in one minute.

Speaker 5: West Texas A&M University is the Panhandle's university. With a commitment to serving the region and the world, WT is proud to put people, programs and places first. We are a strong community, a herd of buffaloes proud to call West Texas home. Learn more at wtamu.edu.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT. This is episode number 40. I'm talking to Stephen Crandall, who is the Musical Artistic Director at Texas and Dr. Andrew Hay, who is the Executive Director of the Texas Panhandle Cultural Foundation. You know, I was thinking about this as I was driving into work today. When I was young, growing up in Pampa, Texas, every summer we would make the trip to Canyon, Texas, and we would stop at the museum and we'd spend half the day at the museum. Then we'd go down the canyon. We'd go hiking, playing down in the water, down there. And then we'd go see TEXAS.

Randy Ray: That really left an impact on who I am. And I think it's been that way for a lot of people. And the museum was a big part of that. I love the museum to this day. I have spent a lot of hours recently at the museum, and I've helped with some exhibits and stuff so I love the place. I'm fortunate to be on that vision committee where we're thinking about what the future of the museum may look like. Andrew, tell me what you think it may look like.

Dr. Andrew Hay: Oh gosh, there's a lot there. I think first of all, I'd say you mentioned some elements that actually are part of the history of the museum itself. We're not mentioning the amphitheater and where it is for Texas, which is down at Palo Duro Canyon State Park. And actually the road, 4th Avenue in Canyon was built when the museum was completed. It was built so that it would connect to the new road that the CCC was building down in the canyon. And so it was actually this nice poetic link between the front door of what is now Pioneer Hall of the museum and that road down into the canyon as it became a state park. I love that all of a sudden there's this full circle moment for the elements we're talking about. We're talking about TEXAS, having the privilege of being down at the state park, performing at the amphitheater, and then the road that leads all the way up to Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum.

Dr. Andrew Hay: The future of that museum, it is an absolute treasure trove. Like you mentioned, this is where WT gets to brag on itself and say one of its front doorsteps, I think as Dr. Wendler has called it, is this wonderful museum with an incredible past. It was the first museum on a university campus in the state of Texas. It was the first university museum south of what was then the Mason-Dixon Line, if you want to call it that, so it really has this pedigree. And I get to work alongside not only talented people like Stephen, but also talented people at the museum who really believe in the vision and what it could be.

Dr. Andrew Hay: It is a museum that has a collection that, I really kid you not, I get to access it daily if I wish. And what we have in that museum is pretty much unparalleled if you're talking about Western heritage, if you're talking about native peoples, the earliest peoples of this region and the story there, and fossil record here, the geology record here, what it took for pioneers to come across here and try to settle this region and then has incredible contemporary collection in the archives of the museum. A lot of people don't know that the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, top floor, you have a Research and Archive Center that that is probably a 500-mile radius. It is the archive. The oral and textual history of this entire region is found right in that building.

Dr. Andrew Hay: So very special place, keeps me up at night, but it keeps me up in a good way, thinking. Every museum has this challenge to say, "How do you get the prime pieces of the collection in front of as many people, the diverse collection in front of a more diverse public?" And that takes a jigsaw puzzle. It really is a jigsaw. I say, it's creating space.

Randy Ray: You have so many artifacts that it's almost impossible.

Dr. Andrew Hay: It is, it is. We've got great curators and leaders there. You do have to say, "What are the most important things? And if they're not in front of people, why are they not in front of people? What would it take to get them in front of people?" And then the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society Board has been saying, "Well, what does the space need to be, the inside of the buildings? Because it's four buildings put together make up the museum. What do we have to do to create the best type of experience as possible for many, many people to come in and many, many more?" So I love that challenge. And I know the president is thinking that way, too. What does the museum become?

Dr. Andrew Hay: And then beyond that, another arm of the important factor of the museum is education. We serve every independent school district in the Panhandle of Texas and we serve many outside of that region as well, the immediate 26 counties. We also serve dozens of other schools. And so we've started some great initiatives with a STEAM Lab and we're looking to actually do a few other things in the future, pretty quick here, with education.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I'm going to ask each one of you. Is it a weird model having a musical and a museum put together, operating under the same umbrella? And has anyone ever done that before?

President Wendler: You know, I'm not sure anyone has ever done it, but I don't think it's so much a weird model, but it goes to, in a sense, the foundation of our region, and that is the culture of the Panhandle. And between the museum in its historic presentation of the Panhandle's peoples and so on through artifacts and their various collections and the play through this, I'll say based on the museum, a more contemporary view of what West Texas is and the challenges, the human struggles and so on that it took to settle the region that still exist, to some extent, it may be weird. But it may be because it's West Texas and the people here value their past a little bit, in many ways strongly value their past.

President Wendler: And what Stephen is doing with the musical, trying to, I don't want to say contemporize it, but to make it more responsive and a little different than it used to be. Not that it was bad before. It's just that the audience has changed and so on. The museum is challenged in the same way, I believe, how to bring this and make it relevant to new eyes and new ears and so on, in both cases. Maybe it is a little weird, I don't know, but-

Randy Ray: Do you think it's weird, Stephen?

Stephen Crandall: Not in the sense that both entities really focus on, as Dr. Wendler said, preserving history, preserving some connection to this region and how it was founded and how we made life possible here. So in that regard, no, it doesn't confuse me. It seems like a natural partnership because it's-

Randy Ray: They're both historic and they're both creative.

Stephen Crandall: Yeah.

Randy Ray: So I think in some ways it makes sense. So genius idea you came up with. Maybe more people should follow that model.

President Wendler: Don't tell me that. I won't be able to get my head through the studio door. No, it's fun. And by the way, there were naysayers in the beginning. A lot of people were concerned about it, that they each would lose their identity, that all these things would happen. But my contention has always been, the stronger we make the West Texas identity what it is, the more distinctive the region becomes. And it's already distinctive. But to pronounce that loudly, you say "brag on it", I think is very important. It will be attractive to people from all over the place, not just West Texas, although half of our students right now are essentially West Texans.

Randy Ray: All right, gentlemen, with every episode I throw a curve ball. I'm going to ask each one of you. This may be a tough question. I teach a class in the summer and I teach a class every semester. One of my assignments is I ask my students to write an essay on their favorite book. And I'm going to ask each one of you to tell me what your favorite book is. And don't try to kid me into being Mr. Super-spiritual saying the Bible. I don't want to hear that one. So tell me about a book

that really influenced you, that you would say, "That's my favorite book." That's a tough question.

President Wendler: Not for Andrew.

Dr. Andrew Hay: Well, there's a lot and this is difficult, but mine's always been The Hobbit.

Randy Ray: Really?

Dr. Andrew Hay: Yeah. And I just saw my oldest read that book for the first time this past week.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Andrew Hay: And so it rekindled those feelings of... There's just this great, simple story and there's great... Well, it didn't have closure. He went on to keep writing things. He didn't stop. You know, just a very simple story, I think, about an intrepid journey and meeting a goal and a challenge and overcoming that. So I've always loved The Hobbit. I almost said The Iliad, though, but-

Randy Ray: Do you like The Lord of the Rings, too?

Dr. Andrew Hay: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah.

Randy Ray: You're a big Tolkien fan.

Dr. Andrew Hay: Yeah, yeah. But The Hobbit's just a great kind of innocent book, in a way.

Randy Ray: Did you like the movie or not? Was it disappointing?

Dr. Andrew Hay: I watched the first one of The Hobbit and then I didn't... Not because it was bad, I just kind of got bored.

Randy Ray: Interesting. Stephen, what's your favorite book?

Stephen Crandall: One experience of a book that has lasted for me is the Count of Monte Cristo. That book, I don't know why, it just captured me. I think it was partly to do with the theme of redemption and just the idea of being beat up by life and then finding a way to make your way back and do something positive.

Dr. Andrew Hay: Seems like vengeance.

Stephen Crandall: I like vengeance. I like... Good guy winning.

Randy Ray: The Count of Monte Cristo. That's interesting. Dr. Wendler, do you have a favorite book?

President Wendler: Yeah, I got a bunch of them. Mine aren't as cerebral as those two are. Probably, and this is going to sound bad, but *The Power Broker*. It's about Robert Moses, who I'm very familiar with because I grew up on Long Island. He invented, for all practical purposes, contemporary toll roads. The Interstate Highway System started along Long Island with Northern State Parkway, Southern State Parkway that led into Manhattan and allowed this 118-mile fissure of land feed industry and commerce in the five boroughs every day, coupled with the railroads. He wanted to put the railroads out of business. He created bridges and all that sort of stuff. And he and Al Gore and Dwight Eisenhower, actually... Al Gore Senior, not the young Al Gore, but his dad, the senator from Tennessee, basically created the Interstate Highway System.

President Wendler: So, it's all about transit and cars. Plus Jones Beach, which I always liked, and Fire Island were all... I used to go across the Robert Moses Causeway to go there. But it was really just an interesting example of somebody working through challenges and difficulties. And the most interesting part of it was he never had a driver's license. He never had a driver's license. But anyway I like that book because it was about solving complex problems.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I will share. I have several favorite books, but I will tell you what one of my favorite books is and how it ties into our conversation today. One of my favorite books is *Dances With Wolves*. And I like the movie and I like the book, too. If you read the book, it happened in Palo Duro Canyon. And so that was always one of my favorite books. I loved the movie. I thought the movie and the book were really close. I got to meet the author because the Panhandle-Plains Museum brought him in. And so that was a special moment. I got to spend a little time talking to him about it. And so that was really cool that I got to do that.

Randy Ray: That's what I tell my students. Things like that are perks that you get going to college. You know, I will never forget talking to him. And I said, "You know, I love the movie. I love the book. Usually movies and books are so different, and then I'm always disappointed with the movie." He said, "I can tell you why you liked the movie." He said, "Because I wrote the screenplay, too." So I thought that was cool.

Dr. Andrew Hay: It's like the best of both worlds, really.

Randy Ray: Yeah. So anyway, that's my story of my favorite book and my favorite museum. There you go. Well, thank you, guys for joining us today. I've enjoyed our conversation. Please join us again next time for Reflections from WT. It will be episode number 41. We'll see you then.