

Episode 2: Production Management: the Career, and the Art

Editor's Note: *This episode of ThisGen Podcast is the second in the 8-episode series. If you are able, we encourage you to listen to the series [here](#). For reference, transcripts are provided. Please confirm accuracy prior to quoting, as typos may be present.*

RIMAH: So hello and welcome to ThisGen podcast. And with me today Crystal Lee, production manager, and her mentor Spike Lyne technical director of Indigenous theatre at the National Arts Centre of Canada. Welcome. How are you both doing?

SPIKE: Excellent, Rimah! Thank you.

CRYSTAL: Great! Thank You.

RIMAH: Because we spent this year online so, and it's an audio creation, so it's really easy to take people with us in other places. If we would meet in person, where would you likely meet?

CRYSTAL: So I met Spike, through an internship, at the NAC and, I guess my memory associated with Spike is always in Ottawa. So I want to say anytime we had like whether they were personal, conversations or professional conversations they were always in the NAC somewhere; in the nooks and crannies of the NAC. Perhaps I'm just being nostalgic of like being in a theatre, but I would say we would probably meet, in the house of Southern Hall just because I really think that's a beautiful space, and I really always love being either backstage or in the audience.

RIMAH: Spike, do you agree with that?

SPIKE: Overall, yes. But I'd say maybe, by the canal in on one of the parks or something like that just because it's a nice day —

RIMAH: Mhmm. That's nice.

SPIKE: You'll get outside —

CRYSTAL: That's fair.

SPIKE: Just because yeah, at the NAC, yeah, we now have windows since the renovations but, prior to that it was, it was quite a —

CRYSTAL: A dark, gothic, place. [laughs]

RIMAH: I like the canal. I think I would go with that.

CRYSTAL: Yeah, yeah. That's fair. [laughs]

RIMAH: Crystal, you're a production manager.

CRYSTAL: Yeah.

RIMAH: I'm really curious to know how did you get involved in ThisGen Fellowship because these kinds of fellowships, you know, when you hear about them, you immediately think of a playwright, a director, an actor; but for a production manager, what brought you there?

CRYSTAL: I have been involved with Why Not through a few other projects that they were doing they were — I was fortunate enough to I guess have been noticed by them, and then they've been hiring me on since the early days of my career. And I love the company so, just getting to be in, involved in some conversations of, like, other initiatives that they're working on, ThisGen kind of came up. And I suggested that it would be nice to have other voices that are not, I guess, from the technical and logistic and management sides because they're often not seen as creatives or artistics, and their voices are also important, their mentorship and opportunities for that are also important. And I really think that, in order for creatives — if we're if we're gonna kind of call them that — a creative, or a designer, a director, playwright, to have the support that they need to really focus on their craft, they need good technical support, good management, good, good people who want to make sure that their process is seen and heard. So after Ravi and Miriam and Kelly Read, all said, "well you know what, this might be a really serendipitous opportunity for you to be part of this mentorship. You're embarking on a large project with us. So that can sort of be attached to this project, as well". And the show that I was working on at the time was going to be the objective of this fellowship; it's since changed, since COVID. But yeah, it was really just, I was in the right place at the right time, and I was heard; I'm often always heard at Why Not. So yeah. They thought of me and here I am!

RIMAH: I have to tell you that I was very excited to know that you are part of the fellowship because one of the things that we usually struggle with is to find — to meet — the perfect production manager.

CRYSTAL: Oooh! Perfect. [laughs]

RIMAH: It's really something important. For you Spike, did you already know when you went to theatre school that you want to become a technical director, or a production manager?

SPIKE: Oh, not at all. When I first went to theatre school, I thought I was going to be a stage manager, because that's what I knew. I, you know, in high school I'd done, you know, a little bit of production, you know, working backstage. And then when I got out of high school, I kind of had what's called a "gap year", and I worked for my dad, but I was also doing amateur musicals in

Hamilton. And, did — ended up stage managing a very large production of, “Annie” that happened just as I was applying to the theatre school. And so that’s what I thought, you know, “oh this looks like fun. It looks cool. You know, you’ll be a stage manager.” When I got to the theatre school I was like, “no that’s not what I want to be”. And actually, I wanted to be a lighting designer — and so that’s what I was doing. But, in Montreal — I decided to stay in Montreal — it was hard to be just a lighting designer. So I ended up working at the “Sadie Bronfman Centre” which is now called “The Segal Centre” and ended up being a technical director there. But also being a lighting designer at the same time, working with the Yiddish theatre there as the resident lighting designer. So it was also, gave me that ability to hone my craft at that time. And it just kind of kept happening that I kept ending up in these kind of technical director, production management roles, just to put food on the table. And I also ended up working at “McGill” for 10 years as the — what was my title there? Technical production manager.

RIMAH: And were you mentored by other people back then when you were younger?

SPIKE: It [sighs] wasn’t quite as defined, at that time — I think. You know you certainly found people that you looked up to that you could use as role models, but there, there didn’t seem to be the same kind of thing that there is now. At that time it was still very much, “well that’s just the way we do it”. Kind of. [laughs]

RIMAH: Yeah. When you started your fellowship, did you have already specific clear questions or topics that you wanted to touch on? And did you have a clear idea of your time with, Spike?

CRYSTAL: Yeah I guess, the pandemic kind of threw a wrench and everything [small laugh] of course. The first shape of this fellowship was, ultimately, to tour a larger scale project, that Why Not Theatre is working on currently. It was, going to “Shaw Festival”. They were working under a different model with Shaw, because it was more of a co-production, kind of process, I guess. And so Why Not had their own resources, they had their own producers, and they also hired me as their production manager. Shaw already has all these resources [laughs] so it seems to be a little bit awkward for us to come in, into a well-oiled machine already. So just a navigating around what that means within Shaw Festival how to, like, learn about the show using their resources, so that I can take it internationally, was sort of like the big objective for this fellowship. I have no idea how to do that; I’ve never done any international touring, I’ve barely done any touring. And a lot of my growth, I would say, in management really came out of the National Art Centre under Spike. So I just wanted to keep that consistent. Of course, once the pandemic hit, we scrapped that. I mean there is some focus a little bit here and there as some questions are clarified in that process, but ultimately, I wanted to shift it to a larger question that I’ve been thinking about since I moved to Toronto two years ago to start my career. And this was sort of like the ethics of what production management is certainly in the Indian industry which is, where I was getting most of my income from. It was very hard [laughs] and it’s funny that, you know, Spike says, “this is just how it’s done” because it certainly was that sort of mentality, in Toronto for sure. You know, you get paid one flat fee and no one ever questions like the scale of the project. The manager is never brought in early enough to, like, have a say in how the process can be. And I find a lot of my colleagues, you know, are either burnt out or, like, very

resentful of the process. And that's not why I wanted to do theatre; I wanted to do theatre to celebrate with my artistic collaborators.

RIMAH: I would like to come back to this and that they rubric you are preparing —

CRYSTAL: Yeah.

RIMAH: But I would like to build on your answer; Spike giving this special circumstances, what was very important for you to pass on to meet those questions that Crystal had? And was it really doable during the pandemic?

SPIKE: Yeah, actually, you know what? In some ways, this is the best time to be having this discussion, I think. Because, you know, as some people call it you know, “the great intermission”, “the great pause”, whatever you want to call it, that, where, everyone is now sort of reevaluating their lives within live theatre and in production especially. Just because of the number of hours that's usually requested of us, that all of a sudden people are going, “oh my god! This is what it's like to be home at night?”, and you know or at you know 6 p.m where you know you're not constantly working. So, I think this is such a great time to be having these discussions where we can sort of re-evaluate where you're not your head's not completely stuck; stuck in a show, or a festival, or you know that you're jumping from venue to venue because, you know, you're trying to hold down six jobs to pay rent in Toronto, so. And what's also been great about this is that I'm learning as much as Crystal is, I think, maybe even more, partly, you know, about some of my own, I don't want to say prejudices, but work practices that are entrenched, both within me, but also within the industry. And how to re-look at those and how to try to explode them and try to find a way to break out of them, you know I'm loving not being stuck in my office all the time. And what we've been able to do because of this pause is I've been able to also call on other friends and acquaintances to also join us in these conversations. And both Crystal and I have, joined a group, that are all, former NTS, graduates, all coming out of production and having the discussion about what schools teach, and the “the show must go on” mentality and that “this is just the way you do it”. And this is why theatre schools drive production students to extreme so that they're ready for this industry that demands that we drive ourselves to an extreme. And the burnout level within production is incredible. And it manifests in various ways, you know, whether it's elaborate behaviour, addictions, home life, problems — so it's great having these conversations.

RIMAH: Mhmm. Crystal this will bring me to the — in one of the meetings you mentioned that you're working on definitions; defining the role of a production manager, or creative producer, or a technical director. I would really like to hear from you about those. And also the rubric that you were working on.

CRYSTAL: Yeah sure. Yeah, so a part of this pandemic pause I've been spending a lot of my time with, another network of production managers who are like-minded. The group is called “Means of Production”, so I really can't take all the credit of like doing the research, and creating these, these docents and building standards because it really is a collaborative piece of infrastructure

that, it can't come from one voice anyways. So we meet on a weekly basis and so far we've completed our phase one, if that's what we're calling it. It really came out of conversation of like okay, "well what is a production manager?", "what is a technical director?", "what is a PMTD?" Which is, like, the classic indie job [laughs] is to combine both those roles, which are both massive roles. But I don't think anyone has ever really advocated for what those roles can and can't do, because there was never a written definition of those things. At least not one that we were able to pull very easily. I think we came up with a Frankenstein version of like several different contracts. So the first step was eliminating the industry definition of what a PMTD is, which is essentially the sole production person who deals with all the just logistics, production logistics. That's not a sustainable practice, so, it's part of our common language to just get rid of that. Instead, we want to really focus on what the production manager does in a macro sense; looking at all the elements, making sure there's equity between all those elements, prioritizing where you need to, and then distill it down to production logistics; which is where the technical director comes in. Those two jobs can be compiled, it just means that there are sacrifices, but maybe those don't really make any difference depending on the scale of your show. And that's really what we wanted to accomplish with this docent was we want to understand our value, and we also want to educate others in, like, how to value us. Like, it was only because people didn't know what we did and kind of lumped us in into what they thought we did. And then sort of paying us based on the amount of hours they thought we were going to do. Yeah, so there was a huge discrepancy in, like, what the education was versus what the reality was within contracting. And I think it is a learned behaviour that we don't see our own worth — maybe because we aren't spotlighted very often. But yeah, it does come out of school, it does come out of, like, you know, making sure that you're tough enough to, like, withstand this kind of treatment.

RIMAH: It's also important to have the production managers involved from the beginning of the process and to communicate with them like you communicate with every participant in the work. Spike, I have a question to you about, because you have a big experience, and I'm curious to know if you would compare the production manager, technical director role in the past, and now? Do you see a big shift in the role?

SPIKE: I don't know how much of a change there has been. Just unfortunately in Canada that — and I think it's probably the same anywhere — that there are so many people still in the same job 30 years on, so it's still the same, in a lot of ways. That, people who you know started pre-computers are still in, you know, major positions in Canadian theatre, and that they're not, they don't want to change. It's, you know, "why should I change? I've been doing the same way for, you know, 30 years. All my forms are the same, I used to do them by hand and, you know, five years ago I finally put them into Excel.", but I don't think it's changed that much. They're, you know — I think that, there is change — don't get me wrong — there is change. I, I'm sometimes a bit cynical about that —

[CRYSTAL laughs]

SPIKE: It's very slow and, and tiny incremental changes. You know, safety has become such an ingrained thing now. When I went to theatre school — and this was kind of a conversation we

had with this NTS group the other day — when I went to school, the thought of safety; steel-toed shoes, or hard hats, or you know tying yourself off to something, didn't even come into it. You know, or the technical director of the school used to, like, climb up the back of, you know, 20 foot high flats to fix a light, you know, without any thought of his safety, or whatever. And we just thought that was cool. It's like, "oh my god, I can do that?", now like if you told that to Crystal's class or something, they would just look at you in horror. So certainly that has changed, and it's not a, you know, a paradigm shift shall we say. So, I, it's very incremental, and it's as you get rid of, the dinosaurs, then you can start doing change. Unfortunately, — and you often see this in university programs — is that the teacher from, you know, the 1960s who came up from the United States because they're getting away from the draft, came up here and were teaching theatre, and then they taught a bunch of students who now have taken all of that idea, and just are now the teachers. Breaking that model of like how do you break us out of that and move forward and create an ethical production management, or a technical direction, or for anyone in theatre in one way? That's kind of where unions kind of play a good role; they standardize the work week and the hours. It kind of helps drive it for management to maybe be a bit more you know respectful to themselves.

RIMAH: Yeah. Crystal, Why Not Theatre initiated ThisGen fellowship to support BIPOC identifying female artists to get to the next level in their career. For you as a production manager, young production manager, what is the next level in your career?

CRYSTAL: Yeah. I mean, I think I have a lot of passion projects in the works right now. [laughs] This sort of fight for equity and better working standards doesn't stop after the fellowship ends. So I think I will continue working with, the ad-hoc group that I was mentioning before, "Means of Production". That's more of like infrastructure building, potentially formalizing into some sort of association, depending on what the needs are that's not, official yet.

RIMAH: Yeah.

CRYSTAL: And then kind of moving into a more application process, within my own production firm. The Production firm is called, "What by When" that I'm working with a few other associates in developing. And that's really, to kind of, with all of these standards —

RIMAH: Mhmm

CRYSTAL: Apply it to a contract that we would give out to clients, and they would hire our production firm. And within the production firm we would sort of like figure out what's a workable schedule for everyone, share thoughts, collaborate on an equal level, so that ultimately we can kind of help each other out in times of, like, great stress, or like, when it is too much to handle for one person. Or like, if we choose to have a family for instance, you know, those hours are — aside from that I'm also gonna be working for Why Not Theatre as their production manager officially in September. And then I'm also working with "Yes Theatre" in Sudbury just on a very part-time show to show basis, when I can to support their growing model as well, to help the youth artist.

RIMAH: I think you answered my next question —

CRYSTAL: Oooh!

RIMAH: Which is, what you are busy with right now? So I would like to ask you, Spike, what you are busy with right now?

SPIKE: What I'm working on right now, we just finished at the Art Centre a project that our CEO had tasked the production office with which was to help create a national guidelines for reopening post-COVID — or actually not, sorry, not post- COVID — pre-vaccine, to develop a toolkit to help, not necessarily well-established centres to reopen because they've already done some of that work, but our hope is that this will be a tool kit that anyone from the smallest theatre venue or performance space can take and, adapt to their venue. Or even if you're a producing company that goes into a venue, that you can look at this and go, "okay venue x have you done this? And how will we work together to make sure that our audience, and our, cast and our and, our team are safe?", so that's been the big thing. We talked to like 58 different organizations across Canada — we had Zoom meetings with them to just sort of talk about, you know, what their plans were; what would you do if there was a second phase? You know what would make you close down? And things like that. But then after that it was just us kind of banging our heads going, "okay, what do we actually want to create here?" We kind of fell on the idea of creating an audit of the space and how do you look at your room and make it as expandable or compressed as possible. So that was a really interesting project to be on. I also worked on, "Canada Performs" which is, an initiative set up by Facebook with our music and variety, department at the NAC that was to give money to artists to do online, performances, post — after, once you know the pandemic started and once everyone was you know sort of home bound. And so we ended up presenting something like 700 different artists. And so I was, I ended up being the technical director for that, and you know, talking to artists and helping them with their streaming issues and things like that. And then with my role with the Indigenous Theatre, our show is going to be — what it was going to look like? Yeah, we cancelled a lot of shows. Not to mention shows that, we had upcoming that were cancelled. And you know, do we shift those shows to next year, to January? And what and you know —

RIMAH: Yeah, definitely as a theatre community we are dealing with a lot of uncertainty now and there's not a clear plan for next year. That was really a nice conversation with the two of you.

SPIKE: Yes!

[CRYSTAL laughs]

RIMAH: Thank you very much. And I wish you all the best with the rest of your phase one.

CRYSTAL: And I'm actually gonna go on vacation and visit Spike so —

RIMAH: And I hope one day I will come to see the canal that will be my plan for next year —

SPIKE: Yeah. Yeah.

RIMAH: Thank you very much.

That was this gen podcast created by Rimah Jabr. If you would like to know more about ThisGen fellowship, please check Why Not Theatre website at [whynot dot theatre](http://whynot.theatre). Thank you.