

Episode 5 - Between UK & Canada: Careers as Theatre-Makers

Editor's Note: *This episode of ThisGen Podcast is the first 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: Hello and welcome to ThisGen Podcast. I'm Rimah Jabr, and with me today Nikki Shaffeeullah a theatre maker, facilitator, equity worker, and community engaged artist, who also was the artistic director of the award-winning community arts company The Amy Project between 2015-2019. And with us today her mentor Kirsty Housley a director, writer, and dramaturge. She won the Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust award in 2003, for "Q deadly," a live film project. And was twice nominated for the Stage Award for innovation, winning in 2017 for "The Encounter." Welcome and how are you doing?

KIRSTY: Yeah, good, thank you. Yeah, as well as expected with no theatres open.

RIMAH: Yeah. It's a weird time for theatre people. I was reading a lot of material on audio, and one of the things that struck me is the spatial experience of an audio world. And I like always to set up a physical place in our minds and invite the imagination of our listeners to a place. And if we would meet in person, where would you take us?

KIRSTY: If we could meet in person we'd have probably gone to a café just around the corner from my house, called "Forts" where you can sit outside on their terrace and look out over the sea.

RIMAH: Oh nice. I love that.

KIRSTY: We're not there. I'm just talking to you from my bedroom.

RIMAH: Yeah, I know. But we will go there, we have the soundscape. [RIMAH laughs]

KIRSTY: Yeah. We can make it happen.

RIMAH: We can make it happen. I did mentorship in the past and when I think of a mentorship, I think if it's something that is more than just passing the experience to the mentee. I don't know if you agree with me on that, and I'm really curious to know about the role of mentorship in your own life as an artist.

KIRSTY: Yeah. I think I've found — yes I've absolutely, I agree. And the fuzziest says I have had brilliant mentors that maybe don't fit the sort of traditional way that people would think of

mentors fitting? I found it tricky to find those people though because I suppose the processes that I use to make work, and the kind of work that I make, is maybe a bit outside what a lot of British theatre does. So, trying to find somebody who could offer me useful advice rather than, “why don't you try to do it a bit more like us” was a challenge, actually. But I mean formal mentorship, I had a brilliant mentor called Annie Castledine who was a long-term collaborator of “Complicité” and was assigned to me as a mentor on a project but remained a mentor for a long time. She just had extraordinary clarity in the way that she could — like x-ray vision — she could look at what you were doing and exactly see how to help. And that there are still things that she would say that I remember now, and I hear myself saying to other people. But I think also for me like just to look a generation up from me, and try to look at people who perhaps even though they might have made very different work to me, or even work in different industries to me, had followed a different path, and done things in their own specific way. That's been really important. And also, to be honest, probably finding my contemporaries who were on a similar journey was sort of worth its weight in gold, actually. Finding those people that I could meet with regularly and connect with. And I almost feel like that's becoming more important as we've got older. Maybe it's because we're all slightly busier, but realizing how important it is to carve out time to meet and have those conversations about where we're all at has become really an important part of sort of keeping me going, and keeping me inspired, and keeping me sane.

RIMAH: Oh nice. Hi Nikki.

NIKKI: Hi.

RIMAH: For you also, mentorship and this connection to the generation, either younger or older, was something in your experience as a theatre maker. And you initiated “Amy Project” if I'm correct?

NIKKI: Oh I didn't start it, but I was the artistic director for five years.

RIMAH: Five years, yeah. And this somehow inspired Ravi to start ThisGen Fellowship, right?

NIKKI: I'm not entirely sure if that's the case, but cool if it was. I know that Miriam has said that, you know, she was a mentor with “The Amy Project” and found a lot of what we were doing there impactful and influential. So I think it helped inspire what it's become, for sure.

RIMAH: Yeah. So if you can tell us on your early conversation with Ravi about ThisGen Fellowship and how you get involved in it?

NIKKI: I think in our early conversations about it, Ravi and Miriam were very affirming to take this opportunity as a time to really focus on my own learning and development. Especially after having spent a lot of time both at “The Amy Project” and elsewhere, building mentorship structures and doing arts facilitation and things like that. And I had sort of come to a really natural place where I wanted to focus on my own skill development and my own creative voice and invest time and resources and projects that I've sort of had on the back burner for a while.

And an early step that we had was we sat in the boardroom at Why Not and just sort of brainstormed people that could be good mentors. And I was interested in both deepening my work and directing, but also in artistic leadership. And a sort of central thing that I was interested in focusing on was I felt like I had developed some strengths and competencies working more at the indie level with regards to how I liked to build projects, and build community around projects, and produce things. And I wanted more confidence to do that in bigger spaces, maybe working with larger institutions and things like that. And not because that's necessarily a value in and of itself — I love working at the indie level and in community — but that it seemed to be — it kept being asked of me more and more. And I had a big reluctance to — or kind of like — I needed support and understanding how I could do work and the way I wanted to do it, and with my values — because my values were a really integral part of how I did work, and why people wanted to work with me, and why I wanted to work with them — how do I do that in spaces where sometimes those values are kind of antithetical to the way those institutions are structured? So we brainstormed lists of artists who kind of had the artistic expertise that I was looking for, and had the willingness, and the space, and the lived experiences to like to help me have those conversations as well, as part of it. And Kirsty ended up being a great mentor too because of her particular expertise in creating work in ways that are totally innovative and form bending. And her kind of like, radical experimentation with designers and other artists really means that she's constantly challenging the status quo of, in her context, British theatre. So that's been really useful to the conversations that I wanted to have and that we're having in the fellowship.

RIMAH: Yeah. Kirsty definitely this is like an exceptional mentorship because it's happening remotely. And maybe if we didn't have the pandemic, you two would spend some physical time together in a theatre room. Was it easy for you to plan for your time with Nikki? And what was your main focus in phase one?

KIRSTY: Yeah. I mean luckily, so in a lot of the work that I do, it's work that's made in the room together. So in a similar way that the sort of mentorship was made over the series of calls, I didn't have a structure in place. So we had an initial consultation call, and then from that we kind of identified what Nikki's needs were, really. Which were all, understandably, process questions. So things that are really present for her because of the work that's kind of orbiting around at the moment, and the way that the nature of that work is changing at the moment and going forward. So, I mean, I think the first thing we talked about was devising; what is the devising process for me, and what are some of the techniques that I would use to give that a structure, without having to impose the same structure on everything. So just kind of going through a toolkit, really. And then really, just following that thread through, "what is the process?" Following that through all of the different elements; so the dramaturgy of something, the design of something. We've spent quite a lot of time talking about design because, again, when you go into institutions and organizations they expect you to work along a particular timeline. And that timeline is often not one that's suited to a collaborative process or a really "curious in the room" process, which just has different deadlines, and different needs. So it's a tricky process of trying to bring those two things together, and make sure that you can meet the deadlines an organization needs you to meet, but also that your process doesn't get

compromised along the way. So we've really focused on that; making your own work in an environment that's not really set up to support that.

RIMAH: Yeah. Through your conversation, did you feel like there's a difference between how institutions, organizations, and even art projects are run in Canada and the U.K.? Were there things that you wish to have that they are in Canada, or the other way around?

KIRSTY: I don't know what you think, Nikki, but it feels very similar to me.

NIKKI: Mhmm.

KIRSTY: We have different funding structures, I think? Different ways that the organizations are funded.

NIKKI: Mhmm

But yeah. I think that, tell me if this feels unfair to say, but it feels like traditional work lives in big spaces and more formally experimental work lives in smaller spaces and on the map. Certainly community-focused work is not something that often finds its way onto the main stages.

[NIKKI laughs]

KIRSTY: Like you would find with someone like Milo Rau who's running the "National Theatre" whose manifesto states that they work with community non-performers all the time. We don't have the same faith in our theatre cultures that you can make that community art and great art can be the same thing, basically. We sort of see them as being separate strategies; like are you making "high quality shiny work" or are you making "community work"? It seems like a basic sort of flaw of both of our systems, that they don't see that the best work is when you combine those things together.

RIMAH: Mhmm. And for you, Nikki?

NIKKI: Yeah, I would agree with Kirsty's assessment there, that there are differences. And I think those differences are kind of small in the long scheme of things. At least from my subjective experience, which is relevant. I mean, larger institutions in the U.K. are older, and I think Canadian theatre artists might — that's something that might stand out — that there's sort of different relationships to time and "institution" as a construct. And also Canadian theatre is still — less so now than maybe decades ago — but there's still a big part of Canadian theatre making culture that's really preoccupied in defining "Canadian-ness" because in terms of colonial history of performance in Canada anyways, a lot of the work of the of theatre was to articulate what it means to not be American and not be British. And so there was this sort of oppositional energy which sometimes created great things and sometimes created things that were deeply interested in articulating a settler vision of the country in lots and lots of ways that you can see still in Canadian theatre. So I don't know how national identity intersects even onto the subtle

levels, and British theatre. I'd be interested to think about that more. But, yeah. That's the main distinction I can think of. But as Kirsty's saying, I think there's still a lot of the same opportunities, and tensions, and challenges between the two places. It's not terribly different. And yeah that this sort of, also, binary between — this like sort of false binary — between “art, art” and then art that actually engages with community. And yeah. That's also a central thing to grapple with that's present, I think, in both places that we've talked about a lot.

RIMAH: Yeah. I can relate to that. And this is one of the observations for me when I moved to Canada to compare also what I studied in Belgium; and my experience there and then when I came here, and yeah, I could feel that strongly. Kirsty, you have a twin?

KIRSTY: Two girls, yeah.

RIMAH: Two girls, yeah. One of the things that I feel artists are still struggling with is this kind of neglect about how this art job is very demanding. And there are challenges for artists to balance between the family responsibilities, and the job, and their passion of course for the job. How do you balance that? And what are the main challenges? And how do you deal with them?

KIRSTY: Oh, it's so interesting, isn't it? But this conversation has been having — it's been had a lot in British theatre. And there's still a tendency for it to be a conversation that women who make art have, and that men who make art have the luxury of not having. So in the kind of, in the absence of any kind of empathetic solution to this problem for families, I've sort of positioned myself, I suppose, in more of the male role in that my partner is an actor, and so he doesn't make theatre anymore. He films — we do anything that can be filmed and can be formed quickly, he does. But otherwise he stays at home, and he looks after our children. So I don't know what we'd do if we weren't in that position? Yeah. It's a difficult conversation to have because I saw it on your list of questions and I thought, “should we talk about this, or should we not talk about this?” But the reason I wanted to leave it on is because I think that conflict's really interesting. That there is a bit of me that just goes, “I don't want to have to talk about this, like I wouldn't be talking about this if I was a man.” But equally, it's a problem, and it's still a problem for women. And even though I can, sort of — that we've found something that really works for us in our life, and has balanced things brilliantly, and enables me to do lots of things. When Edith was 10 months old, we opened “The Encounter”.

RIMAH: I wanted to talk about it because a change will not happen unless we continue talking about that issue. And I was reading an article in the Guardian a few years ago; artistic director of a theatre in the U.K. talked about if you can have a tax-free babysitting for her children while she's working in the theatre? Or if the government will subsidize the daycare for theatre maker female artist, because like you said, it's still not fair between a female artist and a male artist when it comes to family responsibilities.

KIRSTY: Yeah, yeah.

RIMAH: Yeah.

KIRSTY: I think that stretches across politically, that that's an issue that we have in western, capitalist societies for everybody. It's not just for artists; it's for key workers, it's for people who are working in the supermarket, it's people who are working in care homes, it's for anyone whose work is not flexible and doesn't fit around school drop-offs and pickups; which is actually the majority of the country. We're stuck and everybody's having to compromise between family life and work. And I really hope that if anything positive comes out of this lockdown, it's that people start demanding that actually their work fits around — that work and life shouldn't be separated in the way that they are. And that things are more flexible. That we can be more flexible and more accommodating.

RIMAH: Yeah. I can agree with that. Nikki, you're almost done with your phase one, and you will start your face two. I'm curious about your plans after the whole program is finished? I want to know how this fellowship influenced you to plan for your future? What are your next projects? What do you see yourself in the future doing?

NIKKI: It's really hard to separate the fellowship from everything else, because this fellowship has been completely timed with the pandemic, obviously, and also in my own personal career in life this year, before the pandemic, was intentionally a time of shift. I left my job at "The Amy Project" and I went on a long trip around the world with my partner; which was interrupted because of the pandemic. But it was always supposed to be a time, of kind of, like transition, where I wanted to take space from — or you know — I was really enjoying all the work I was doing, but I wanted to take some space from some more to do some development on projects, and deepen some artistic relationships that I had, and focus on writing that I was doing, and make more time for learning. And I actively wanted to seek out mentorship. So this year already has been really formative because of all of those things personally and professionally. I have clear senses of directions I might go in, but I'm trying not to plan too actively. I don't have a five-year plan. I'm really certain that — the projects that I'm working on, a lot of them are moving in nice ways, and I'm excited just to hopefully realize those in a world where we can have theatre again. I'm working on some film projects which is really fun, and a bit newer for me. I think it's likely that artistic leadership is one way or the other be part of my future. I'm really invested in sectoral change, invested in the community of the arts industry and equity issues, and fostering space for innovation and excellence in ways that move us to be better across all planes of existence, and not just within the art sector. And so, I can't continue to be an artist unless I'm also asking those questions and finding places to practice answers to them. So I think as long as I am an artist, I will want to be part of those things; that's just how I work. But I'm really open to what that looks like. I'm asking a lot of questions, and I'm listening a lot, and I'm seeing ways that companies are shifting, not just in terms of whose leading, but of how we conceive of leadership and collaboration. And yeah. So I'm really excited to see where things go. And I kind of jumped into leading a lot of things quite early in my career, and I just now want to pretend I'm just at a theatre school, and experiment a bit more. Yeah.

RIMAH: [laughs] Yeah. In terms of leadership and future, I'm really hopeful that things are going in a good direction in Canada. Still I feel there is something I miss here which is the press or media relationship with artists.

NIKKI: Hmm.

RIMAH: Art journalism in Canada is still not that strong. And the relationship between artists and journalism is still not that — it's not going as fast as how we grow with the art community. I don't know if you agree with me on that? Or feel, like, had this experience or not?

NIKKI: I think you probably have a much clearer sense of that gap good because you've lived in multiple different countries. And I know you've lived as an artist in multiple different countries. So, A, I believe you, and B, I think yeah. I've done a lot of theatre writing, not as a reviewer or as a journalist, but I was editor of "ALT theatre magazine" for four years. And so, deeply engaged with how people are writing about theatre, and that is really important to me. I think it's important for a number of reasons; I think it's important we work in an ephemeral live art form, and it's critical to be able to speak about it in different media. But also because I also, the work that I'm especially interested in, is things that are happening created by artists, and in forums, and communities, that aren't being like necessarily explored in mainstream media, that isn't always in "The Globe" or "The Post", or whatever. And so, a secondary function of journalism is to archive what's happening in the arts landscape. And if that's not being written about, then it's not being archived in a way where then it's existence can be opportunistically denied, or whatever. So, for multiple reasons, I feel like writing is important about theatre. And whether that's actual text-based writing, or podcasts, or just other ways of contributing to this archive and to how we see people reacting to work. So having worked from that literary, or the arts magazine perspective, I see how there could be more engagement. And I guess that I don't know, I don't, I don't know —

RIMAH: Yeah. Especially what I mean also highlighting the artists.

NIKKI: Oh, yes.

RIMAH: And celebrate them. Especially young artists.

NIKKI: Mhmm.

RIMAH: Celebrate them and present them to the community, and the society and people in general. I won't keep you long. Kirsty, I wonder what you are busy with right now? What are you working on right now?

KIRSTY: So at the moment, you know, because of the nature of where we're at, it's only a mixture of development work and digital work. So there are sort of projects that would usually live shows that are now becoming digital. Maybe we'll be digital and live. But in the meantime, until we can all get back into theatres, with we're finding a different way to share those stories. So a

couple of those things before the end of the year, and then some sort of early development work on pieces that will have to wait until theatres open. But for me, there's a whole load of prep, and research, and reading, and writing, and conversations that need to happen before you can get in a room anyway. So all of that work is happening for me now. So yeah. Those things.

RIMAH: Yeah. Final question to you, I like to work with magic and fairy tales, if I would give you the magic stick, and you would change something in the theatre world, one thing, what this would be?

NIKKI: To which one of us is that question?

RIMAH: The question for the two of you. That you can go for.

NIKKI: Yeah. I think the magic stick — this is something that I would like for society in general — is for people to have, wherever they are, to triple, or quadruple, or quintuple, their ability and willingness to engage in conflict with generosity for themselves, and for the other person. And a willingness to hold ourselves accountable, and to really give ourselves time for nuance. I think that's critical for having healthy collaborations, for having safe collaborations, for having exciting work, and for having equitable work. So I think yeah, having a lot more time, space, confidence, and care, to have really good communication and collaboration.

RIMAH: And so, Kirsty?

KIRSTY: I'm going to use my magic stick just to make tickets a lot cheaper. That's what I'm gonna do. Yes.

RIMAH: That's really great, yeah.

KIRSTY: People are free, yeah, to have subsidy at a level where you can reduce your ticket prices, so that going to the National Theatre doesn't feel like an investment for in this country; because it does right now. I don't blame those organizations whose ticket prices have gone up. That the subsidy is not high enough. And I think that everyone is just — everyone should be able to access this work. It shouldn't feel like a luxury.

RIMAH: Yeah.

KIRSTY: Right. That's my magic.

RIMAH: Yeah. I might use it to just get the best salary for every artist in the world. That they don't have to worry about how to make a living. [laughs]

NIKKI: I like both of your, really, practical, specific, magic wand things, and I, yeah...

thisgen podcast - episode 5 transcription

RIMAH: Thank you very much. That was really nice talking to you two. I wish we have more time. But maybe next time for ThisGen podcast part two. Thank you.

NIKKI: Yeah. Thank you so much, Rimah.

KIRSTY: Thank you very much. Thank you. Bye!

RIMAH: That was ThisGen 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.