

Episode 6 - A Dramaturge's role: Between Experiential Traditional

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. With me today Intisar Awisse, a playwright, editor, dramaturge, currently based in Waterloo. And with us her mentor Amrita Ramanan director of literary development and dramaturgy at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. How are you both doing?

INTISAR: Doing very well today, thank you for having me.

AMRITA: I'm great, thank you.

RIMAH: First I'd like to invite the listeners' imagination to a place where we would meet, in auditory, of course, space is fictional no matter how we address it because it's a soundscape in the end. So you can name a place that you prefer we could meet in right now.

INTISAR: I would like to be meeting by any body of water. A lake anywhere, here in Ontario, the Mediterranean — any, any body of water.

AMRITA: Mine is very similar to Isa's — I was thinking about a beach. I do not have a preference of which beach, but I feel as long as the weather is nice, and the water is warm, that would, that would be my joy and preference.

RIMAH: Oh nice. I like that you chose something outdoor. It's a lovely weather today, I really like it. It's nice, it's not so warm, it's not so cold. So it's really nice. Okay, let's go there.

[INTISAR and AMRITA laugh]

RIMAH: Intisar, you're almost done with phase one, but I would like to get you back to the beginning. I want to ask you how did you heard about the fellowship, and what was the process? How did you apply? Did you know about your mentor back then?

INTISAR: So the process to get to Amrita, wasn't that straightforward. Why Not Theatre wanted there to be an international component that fits in with their mandate and the scale of the work that they do, — because they really try to foster kind of connections between global theatre institutions and artists working in different, different countries. And that global collaboration

was something that became more important to me because I realized that there aren't many resources to foster those kinds of connections here in Canada, and this program would allow me to do that. And so from that we came up with a list of potential collaborators between Ravi, Miriam, and myself, and then we narrowed that down based on my needs and my desire. And ultimately I wanted to work with a Black woman or a woman of colour focused on dramaturgy and literary management at a very high level, in a meaningful and impactful way. And Amrita was just the perfect fit because of her past experiences and because of her current role at OSF. The scale of the work that they do and the resources that they have is just incredible. And I just couldn't find a woman of colour in a similar role at any of our major institutions here in Canada. So it was really a great learning opportunity for me to see what you can do for your communities with those kinds of resources behind you. And yeah, it was a brilliant, brilliant learning experience for me because of that. And for phase two I'm going to be shifting, having a bit more of a national focus, which is something that I'm excited to buy with the national mentor here.

RIMAH: Amrita, I studied theatre in Belgium and worked there a couple of years and then moved to Toronto. When I first came here, one of the discussions that were inside the rehearsal room about the dramaturge's role — in Belgium the dramaturge was next to me in the rehearsal room, and we would discuss the material and everything in the rehearsal room. Whereas I find that in Canada there is a kind of specific role to confine the dramatized role to the text. So for you, what was your experience working as a dramaturge? Does it shift for you based on the production?

AMRITA: Yeah, yeah. Great questions. I will say that my role has shifted, very uniquely per production and project, which is often based on the intention and desire of the artist. So, similar to what you experience in Canada, I started as a dramaturge that predominantly focused on text-based research and dramaturgy. So I started with a number of different companies — Shakespeare Theatre Company, Great River Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage — where I primarily was a dramaturge that was rooted in text. And then when I was at arena stage, I had a fantastic mentor who introduced me to the intersection of production dramaturgy with artistic and creative producing. That ended up feeling far more in a lane of generative dramaturgy where you could really consider the dramaturge's role in the exploration of producing, manifesting, and supporting a project from start to finish. As well as also a number of different productions where the dramaturgy was far more engaged with public engagement, with civic engagement. So I definitely felt like there was an expansion during my time at Arena Stage. And then after Arena Stage, I worked with an amazing ensemble a Double-Edged Theatre, that's based in Ashfield Massachusetts, and Double Edge creates performances in a laboratory setting that often are developed for about two years before they are performed in front of an audience. And a key point of Double Edges' practice is that they do not start with text.

RIMAH: Wow

AMRITA: They start with a training practice that allows the body to be a vessel for creativity, and allows for imagery from that training process to be part of the world building of a piece. So that was one of my first avenues into dramaturgy that was not foundationally text based from the

beginning, and dramaturgy that actually focused on the culture of response around individuals creating and building a piece together using their bodies. And since then, at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the dramaturgy that I have performed has taken a variety of roles. So there has been dramaturgy that is very focused on new play development and supporting a playwright with a world premiere second production in the development of their play, there has been dramaturgy that is far more focused on world building on a visual narrative building, on community engagement. And, then also dramaturgy, such as, you know, laboratories that I've created for new playwrights where the dramaturgy is very much fluid with producing where I build the laboratory, I, you know, curate who the writers are, I develop a process with them. So it's been a range, yeah.

RIMAH: Yeah. May I ask which one you prefer? [small laugh]

AMRITA: Ohhh! I, you know, honestly it's such a hard question for me to answer which I prefer because I feel it's so dependent on the artists of the project involved. There's definitely certain practices that I prefer. You know, something that Intisar, and I've talked about often in our mentorship conversations is the ... my personal preference of a dramaturge having as long of a runway as possible to build a relationship with the artist and develop the work. So I'd say I prefer to be engaged right at the beginning, and I prefer for that engagement to be, long-term. So, I often will, you know, my desire when it's the best possible solution would be engaging with a project a year before we go into rehearsals, and then continuing that development post-production. So I definitely prefer that, and I also do prefer I'd say the most full-bodied experience with dramaturgy. So I've very much enjoyed those experiences where I also am directly engaging with designers on the dramaturgy of design, where I'm directly engaging with the actors on their dramaturgy, where I'm constantly engaged in the rehearsal room, that type of holistic engagement is absolutely my preference.

RIMAH: Oh, nice. This is great. Intisar, you're lucky to have this mentor. I'm curious, why dramaturgy? When I think about dramaturgy, you feel sometimes dramaturgy making everything work perfectly, but they are not in the spotlight. At the same time, a dramaturge could be a playwright. But why dramaturgy? When did you know you wanted to become a dramaturge?

INTISAR: Oh, that's such a really interesting question. I think for me my interest in dramaturgy, it comes from being a playwright. It comes from working with other fantastic dramaturge — watching their process and being just as interested in what they were doing, and fascinated by what they were doing, and how the process, and kind of the lens that they were bringing to the work. I found that just as interesting and just as exciting. On the other hand, like in a really practical sense, it's related to kind of what I do in my day job — like my Joe job — as an editor I work with writers um on in their manuscripts, writers who are kind of at all stages, in with their work; from kind of first-time writers, people who are self-publishing, academic writers who are writing dissertations and theses; and kind of really helping them in a substantive way cohesively get to the end of their manuscript. And then once they're at that point, help them try to figure out kind of what comes next. And then at some point it dawned on me that I'm a playwright. I work in theatre, theatre is my love, I could marry the two. And dramaturgy would be a way to do

that. And also engage that part of my brain that has that is deeply interested in dramaturgy and, and the process that dramaturges' use, and the work that they do with the playwright and helping the support and the questions, and the provocations that they present and ask. And I'm, I'm always in a room with both parts of my brain firing kind of from that perspective. And so this fellowship was an opportunity to explore that a bit more and in depth.

RIMAH: Mhmm. Yeah, what I love about theatre is being with people in the room. It's always very nice. Especially if people are creating really good together, it's a good match, it's the best. Amrita, I sensed from what you described that the mentorship had also a role in your own life as an artist. And you also said in the article that was published in The Globe and Mail, "what I love about mentorship is the mutuality of the relationship and how the mentor and mentee can learn and grow from each other". I would like to know from you about how your relationship with Intisar during this period in the ThisGen Fellowship how this relationship grew, and how it was the mutual growing for you?

AMRITA: The first thing I have to say is Intisar is the most incredible artist and human. So I feel it's so fortunate to have been her mentor. And we already have great dreams and schemes for the continuation of how we will be able to move forward. So, everyone listening should know who she is, and know her work, and connect with her — she is incredible. And yeah, to speak to you know my philosophy on mentorship, I was very fortunate early in my career, as well as also in my training at the university, to receive, such deep support from a number of mentors who really saw dramaturgy as an incredible superpower within the theatre, who really saw the impact of dramaturges who were fighting for equity, for, who are looking for the way in which they can most supportively curate seasons, who are looking you know towards support of playwrights. I found a number of mentors that were very willing to be able to let me learn from them, and also provide an array of opportunities. So I feel very fortunate because I will admit that in the U.S. even though it has grown, there were very limited opportunities for dramaturges to receive professional development. There were very few internships and fellowships at the time when I was looking. There were very few programs that were dedicated to dramaturgy at the time I was going to school. So I'm glad that that has grown, and I'm also very grateful for my own personal journey with all of the individual, independent, curated support that I've received in this field. And with that, yes I do believe that mentorship is mutual because I consider myself a lifelong learner. I do not consider myself an expert, even if I have collected experience. I feel that there is only a path towards growth if you are constantly embracing a form of learning and dialogue. And so what I've really enjoyed about my time with Intisar is I've learned so much about Intisar's artistry, about her desires as a dramaturge, about her desires in regards to generative producing and curation, in regards to what it means to be a parent who's also an artist, what it means to be an artist in Canada at this time — and that learning has fueled me it has given me inspiration and new thinking. And to me any form of relationship — I never want to put a hierarchy on mentorship because I feel like regardless of who the mentor or mentee is, there's always growth in exchange that is such a gift and such a benefit. So to me mentorship is based very foundationally on that sense of exchange, and what can we learn from each other in order to move forward?

RIMAH: You mentioned parenting, which is something we touch on in previous episodes. And Intisar, I saw your lovely son. How do you manage your time between responsibilities and your work as an artist?

INTISAR: I, you know I think I would have to answer that question differently today amidst a, you know, a global pandemic and, you know, kind of, like, the social uprising, you know, the civil rights movement of our time that we're currently in, right? And a year ago I would have had a very different answer for you and at the moment without access to you know public schooling, and you know this has been a summer without camps and kind of doing a split shift with my partner for child care, it — I've learned a lot from this, kind of from what it is to be an artist kind of in this moment. It's really, at times it feels really quite impossible, but then I realized that every day you just have to get up and do it, so it is possible. And then at the end of every day, you think, "Ugh! I don't know how that happened. I don't know how we got through that day." And then you've got the next day, you know? It's a little "Waiting for Godot" in that sense.

[laughter]

INTISAR: [laughing] So, you just, you just go on. But, I've been thinking about it a lot recently in the light of what's happening in the fall. I think in a sense going counter to how I work in that I have to be really regimented and everything has just been sliced right down to the minute almost about who's doing child care, who's working, who's got meetings, and just kind of trying to balance that with my partner. And I mean, and I say that with the recognition that I do have the support of my partner, right? And we have just one child. So to be — say you're a single parent with multiple kids without access to kind of school and kind of just the community support you would have, that seems like a true impossibility to me. Those people are heroes. I don't know how they do it because I feel like right now we're just kind of barely hanging on. So, this is not the norm, right? Like, what we are experiencing now is not the norm, right?

RIMAH: Yeah

INTISAR: And so I think it's very important to understand that. I say it's very difficult to be an artist in this moment and kind of pay attention to your artistic practice, the way that you should is, is challenging at the moment.

RIMAH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Looking back at phase one, was there anything you wished you knew that you didn't know about? Or something you wish to change?

INTISAR: Well, you know there was no, I know, insight into global pandemics, right? Like at the time when [laughs]

RIMAH: Yeah

INTISAR: So yeah, I think just — I don't know what I would change about this experience, happening in kind of the wider context it happened in, because it's given me kind of a real sense of the kind of the relationship between chaos and control. And that you know balance is a myth.

Like, we're just, everything is kind of imbalanced, and you just have to kind of navigate that uncertainty at all times. It's given me kind of a real appreciation for that, and has kind of taught me to let go a little bit and lean into that chaos.

RIMAH: Mhmm. Amrita, for Intisar, of course, you needed to design a kind of curriculum or a plan for your time with Intisar and this year was very special that we had to do everything online. How was it for you to design this program that you knew that you would not be in the same place with Intisar?

AMRITA: Mhmm. Yeah, I feel very grateful, for Intisar's creativity and nimbleness because admittedly both of us had envisioned this being an opportunity where Intisar could come and spend time at OSF, where there could have been direct mentorship and exchange that would have happened, you know, potentially in the same space — in a space where there could have also been an engagement with rehearsal or some of the processes that I would have normally been involved with at OSF had it not been for a pandemic. And thankfully, you know, in our early conversations, you know, Intisar had such clarity about goals and aspects of the practice of dramaturgy and literary management and development that she wanted to explore. Many of which we were able to do with conversation with, sharing resources electronically, with inviting, you know, other possibilities in terms of connection. And then also, the "Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of Americas" decided to have their conference fully virtual this year which was, in June. And that was a great opportunity where both Intisar and I attended and were able to share some thoughts and feedback from that conference. And we'll have follow-ups to come. So, I, you know, I, I really thank you, Intisar because I know that it was not the most ideal circumstance to not have that physical connection given how so much of dramaturgy in practice is often what I feel can be experienced in a rehearsal room, or experienced in a culture of what it means to see the dramaturge act on their process, or activate their process. But I do feel like we were able to accomplish so much in the conversations we could have, in sharing the virtual conference. And then, one of our future goals is I'm currently running a virtual writer's group, and so my hope is to also bring Intisar into that.

RIMAH: Oh nice. Can I join?

AMRITA: Oh yes! Yes, I'd love to, I'd love to expand it. Absolutely.

RIMAH: Well, the pandemic definitely had its advantages also —

AMRITA: Mhmm. Yeah.

RIMAH: Besides, like, yeah of course it's not a nice thing to have, but it has its advantages, one of them is focusing on writing sometimes. People just they try to escape reality and focus on writing.

AMRITA: Yeah.

RIMAH: Are you busy with something? Are you writing something now?

AMRITA: I — I am not writing any form of plays or anything for myself at the moment, but to your point, RIMAH, what has been really beautiful during this moment is I've been able to connect with a number of playwrights very freely who are finding this moment to be a moment of opportunity towards focused writing and focused development. As well as also transforming their work, you know? Many of whom had plays that they're now considering as TV shows, or films, or audio plays, or podcasts. So there's been this beautiful transformation across forum with storytelling. And what I loved about that moment is to be able to work with artists very freely. And so, there is a writer's group that I have at OSF that is made up of 15 company members. We're all working on different pieces of writing. And then there's also a number of writers who have connected with at OSF where we just schedule very open conversations to talk about life art work at this moment. And, you know, I say that with also the recognition of, of the challenge that so many artists are facing. So while there might be a blessing of focus and time, there's also a challenge of literal finances and other resources. Many playwrights who had productions cancelled this year, which is a very sad thing. So I do feel like my role and my responsibility in my artistry is being as creative as possible and supporting them in their continued artistry. And making sure that *they* feel motivated to continue with their creativity. Because their creativity is, you know, it's abundant, and it's, it's something that I think is so beautiful — so beautiful to cultivate. It's like a plant in the ground, where I think it requires a certain form of nurturing and cultivation. And I know in a moment like pandemic it can be very challenging to cultivate without a partner, without someone who can actually be there for you to say, "I believe in you, and I'm here to talk to you, and I'm here to support your writing." So, that is what I've been doing.

RIMAH: Ohh, interesting and beautiful. Intisar, are you busy with something right now?

INTISAR: Yes. For me at the moment, I've been focused on a new play that I'm developing in residency with a company in KW, Greenlight Arts. They're just kind of this fantastic little company doing really wonderful work that kind of deeply resonates for me. And that play has been slowly — I mean, I was just in the early stages of exploring this new play when the pandemic hit. Technically, the residency is wrapping up. So I'm getting to that place with it. And we've got workshops coming up in the fall, I believe, and so I'm just kind of working towards that draft and excited to kind of see what it can be. I'm not sure what it'll look like to do a Zoom workshop, or whatever. Whatever you know form it has to take. But I am kind of excited to let other people into that world. And then dramaturgically, yeah, there are a few things in the works that I'm kind of really excited by. And I don't, I don't think I can say — it's not really my place to say. But I'm really looking forward to the dramaturgy projects coming up in the fall and in the new year. Yeah, so busy!

RIMAH: Oh nice, you're busy. I really wish that I can talk to you forever — the two of you. It's really interesting, really smooth, very interesting topics we touched on. And I wish really that we will meet in person one day.

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AMRITA & INTISAR [overlapping]: Ohh. Yeah. Same here, same here!

RIMAH: Thank you very much for this nice chat, and I hope I will see you soon. Thank you.

AMRITA & INTISAR [overlapping]: Thank you. Take care.

RIMAH: That was ThisGen Podcast created by Rimah Jabr. If you would like to know more about ThisGen Fellowship, please check Why Not Theatre's website at [whynot dot theatre](http://whynot.theatre). Thank you.