

Episode 8 - Reflecting on Set Design and Discovering the Elemental Process

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, Bianca Guimarães de Manuel. Bianca lived between Brazil and Canada. She is currently based in Calgary. She's a scenographer and performance designer interested in creation happens between people, systems, and things. Bianca believes scenic elements can interrogate the body and people and question space, destabilize power relationships. And with us as well, Bianca's mentor, Julie Fox. Julie, of course, very famous in Toronto and in Canada in general. She's a production designer for theatre, dance, and opera in Canada for over 20 years. Um ... theatre credits include Stratford Festival, Shaw Festival, Electric Company, Souleppper, and many other companies, including Why Not Theatre. She has received four Dora awards for outstanding set design, the Virginia Cooper award for costume design, and been nominated for Sterling and Meta awards. She is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada, where she also teaches. Welcome, and how are you both doing?

JULIE: Great.

BIANCA: Excellent, thank you

RIMAH: Of course, you are both experts in space, spatiality and the spatial experience, and I always start my episode with inviting the listener's imagination to a virtual space. And, you know, in auditory, whatever space is and however you address, it's still in the mind; so we can be whatever we want. Where would you like to be?

JULIE: [laughs] Well you know, I would like to be in the same room with Bianca — it could be — and it doesn't have to be a room — it could be in nature but, maybe like, a busy café? I feel like the space will cease to matter once we start the conversation. But because we haven't been able to be present actually together, that's what I'm imagining, and what I would wish for.

RIMAH: Bianca?

BIANCA: Yeah, similarly I think if we could be in the same space — maybe in a park with coffee and some, like, eccentric piece of public art — I think that would do it, yeah.

RIMAH: Okay, let's go there.

[BIANCA and JULIE laugh]

RIMAH: Yeah, that's unfortunate that we cannot be in the same room. Bianca, you live in Calgary, and I'm curious to know how did you get in touch with Why Not Theatre and how you get involved in ThisGen fellowship? Also, if you can tell us about what was in your imagination before you applied to the fellowship?

BIANCA: I heard about the fellowship through a friend of mine, a director based in Calgary called Jenna Rogers. And she had, I think, worked with Why Not Theatre in some capacity or known them? I don't know much about that. But anyway, she sent an email to many people saying, "hey here this is a great theatre company from Toronto doing this great program, you should apply" So ... I remember at the time, I was like, "oh, should I apply? Maybe I shouldn't apply? Should I apply? And then I called her, and she was like, "yes, you should apply". So then I applied. [laughs] And I remember at the time I was very interested in thinking through applications as a letter. I wanted to be something more personal, so I was very honest with what I was thinking. I was not trying to pretend anything or ... I was just writing to the committee essentially with open heart. Yeah!

RIMAH: Yeah, believe me, honesty and personal letters, they always work — they always worked with me. Julie, you mentioned in the beginning the pandemic and the challenge you had not being in the same room with Bianca, and maybe this brought some compromises. How did you design for your time with Bianca? Was there a limited number of sessions, or were there some goals you wanted to achieve?

JULIE: Well, I started after our initial conversation where we kind of introduced each other, to each other — I had, I guess, some ideas about maybe a kind of more applied project where Bianca would, for example, create a model and come up with a design for a piece. But, the more we talked, the more that goal kind of got reshaped by these kind of very expansive philosophical discussions we were having about, like, the nature of theatre, the nature of design, Bianca's feelings about that of identity — you know Brazil visibly Canada and these two different arts cultures and the kind of meeting — her experience of the meeting of those two cultures — and so that no longer seemed to be a kind of very relevant objective. It was more — also just because, I think of the nature of the pandemic, it's a period of reflection, you know? Things have stopped. It's not kind of — if we were together maybe she would be shadowing me in a theatre, and we would just be talking about conventional theatre, but this is a moment in time to question everything [laughs] and to reassess. And obviously a lot of people are doing that and there's lots of great things about that. So, ultimately, after this kind of long period of philosophical exploration, we came to this idea and Bianca did all kinds of interesting installation work and explorations out in the community, kind of pursuing themes, I think, that are interesting, that have consistently interested her as an artist. And then we had a space to work with, so we thought, "well what if there was this kind of more specific exercise which was sort of targeting a process or trying to create an opportunity to connect with instinct?" So it was a kind of more essential exercise. Less about kind of process, product oriented exercise,

and more about discovering process — more elemental, more fundamental to an exploration of self and process. And so, and amazingly, we only had seven sessions of conversations. But we actually, you know, today [laughs] arrived at, I think, some pretty exciting results from this kind of experience of meeting each other.

RIMAH: Amazing. But you've been working in theatre for 20 years. And if we will ask you to compare, how were the circumstances for female artists when you started? If you will compare them to now. Was there a big role of mentorship in your own life as an artist when you started?

JULIE: Yeah. I had a great mentor. I was very lucky to come across a Hungarian teacher in theatre school, her name is Yudid Gennady. And she — the exercise that I did with Bianca is something that I got from Yudid. It was really kind of important for me. And Yudid, just in her, just as a kind of, like, life model in her relationship to life, and art, and the connection, and bringing one's kind of a passion and moral drive to kind of improve society, and bring that into work as an artist, I think, had a big impact on me. And as a woman, I don't think I have — you know, I've been incredibly lucky and privileged in my career in theatre, and I don't think I've experienced too many blocks — but one thing I have noticed is that I'm working with more, and more, women where before the management structure was more male and patriarchal. I'm getting to work with, kind of, yeah, more women. And that has improved my kind of daily experience of the intersection of different roles in the theatre.

RIMAH: Bianca, you mentioned many times in your meetings with the fellows and your group calls about the process of working that — I don't want to give too much you will tell us more about it — can you elaborate on your process in designing a set? And if you can also tell me a little bit about how you imagine your relationship with a director or a collaborator when working on a set design?

BIANCA: Oh man [laughs] Where to start? I think in Brazil, the way I was trained and the way the arts industry works in Brazil, I mean — industry depends because you have big centres; so São Paulo and Rio, and they have very specific ways of working; one is more like Telenovela driven, Rio and Carnival, and São Paulo is more like public funding to engage the communities and the social disparity that there is in the country, so there is that. In addition to that, we had a dictator regime that ended in the 80s. And a lot of the regime was chasing artists. And because of that, like there is a thing where you won't trust an institutional space as much as you would trust in Canada because of the censorship and the history of censorship, and military coming in and breaking theatrical spaces. So that's where the theatre exploded and flooded to the streets. So there is a lot more use of alternative spaces, and street theatre. And there's less funding, so that makes you really use the materials you have available. So as a designer, it's less relevant for you to learn how to do a model, and it's more relevant for you to know how to make the scenic elements have dramaturgical relevance with the materials you have available. So, it's kind of finding a balance where you're not saying, "hey look, I can't do this because we don't have money". It's like, "okay, we can have money, so what can we do with this?" Yeah, nowadays, it changed a little bit because I got the training from UofC in Canada, which is a more traditional Canadian way of working with theatre. So I guess how I define my relationship with the director

would be, I would like my relationship with the director to be collaborative. And with a collaborator in a non-hierarchical process, I would also like to be collaborative when I'm going to work with a director and go more with the mindset that I won't have as much artistic input, that there will be more of a translation process. I think that's what I have found, Julia really helped me to kind of track, but also to find the ways where I can find that freedom is something I have to keep working on is one of my biggest takes. And maybe architecture is a good way to do that? Anyways ... [laughs]

RIMAH: Julie, where do you see the set design will make compromises? You've done a lot of work of all context. So for me, I'm someone who collaborated with stenographers, and sometimes the stenography was designed before the text is written, based on an idea and concept. How as a set designer you meet with the director or with the collaborator? Where do you meet, and where you do the compromise?

JULIE: Right. Well, I guess I try to work with the director kind of in a tandem, in a parallel journey, so that we are kind of discovering together that the set design or the design, or the costumes, kind of revealed themselves to us gradually. And they are the kind of final product of many long discussions — again those philosophical discussions — about what is the main idea of this particular piece? Like, what is it that we want to communicate to the community with this piece? And what is our personal connection to it? What is the director's connection? And so, I try to find with the director a kind of lighthouse, of like the beacon of the piece. And we also spend time in the space, in the architecture of the theatre itself. And so how do we express this message within this space? And with the director it's a process of kind of exploration of the space without any preconceived ideas. It's just, what actually is this room? And how can we transform it, or how can we use it best for this particular play? And then, finally, there's the design. And the design, then it becomes very grounded in meaning. It's usually a surprise to me as much as to the director what it is that we've come up with. And so, when you do have this lighthouse, this beacon of what it is that's really essential to you. It makes it easier to compromise because you know you can fight for what you think are — like bottom — like I will go to the wall for this element. And sometimes it has been "I will go to the wall to empty the space. I don't want any of the crap that you normally have in this theatre. I need it to be open completely, and I'm going to spend all my money on nothing". Actually, quite a few times [laughs] that's been the case. So yeah. It makes it very satisfying.

RIMAH: If you will look back to the past 20 years in your experience, when do you think was the best time for set designers in Canada?

JULIE: Well it's funny because I thought, well you know the 1980s and the 1990s it was like — it was also — I was starting out and there are a lot fewer rules. And it was possible to be messier and more visceral. And I'm always attracted to theatre that is quite visceral and messy, and kind of alive! And it was just easier to, you know, there's a good reason to have lots of those safety rules. But I was talking to Bianca about this piece from Brazil, actually, I saw that had like dirt, and fire, and water, and it just revelled in those elements. And it's still the best piece of theatre I ever saw in my life. So I do miss that time a little bit. But I think that today, you know, as as

Bianca phrases it, this dramaturgical design is starting to kind of chip away at ideas of representational design in Canada, and that's a good thing.

RIMAH: Bianca, if we will describe your work to people who don't know you in three words, what would those words be?

BIANCA: Well, that's a hard one. I think at first one would be, collaborative. The second one, I guess, unique. The third one would be, chaotic.

[JULIE and RIMAH laugh]

RIMAH: Interesting. You were talking about the elements, and you were talking about the essential in the last meeting, and this is a new question to you, just came to my mind, now. You know set design sometimes could be realistic, sometimes could be fantasy, and if you will think of those elements and if you will think of the internal logic in the set design and how we can make it understood by the audience — it's an important element we think about when we create theatre — what are the most important elements you think that will decide on if the design will be realistic or fantasy, Bianca?

BIANCA: I think it really depends on the people and the collaborators. There are directors I've worked with that have a huge interest in having a design that is representational, or that their focus is on the script, therefore they want less stress on the design elements, they want to have more work on the text. There are directors I've worked with that they want to have this kind of a magnificent character that is the sonography. And then there are directors, or collaborators that you work with that they're interested in seeing how the design will evolve, right? Experimenting with it and seeing where it will go. So I think for me at this point is more the people I collaborate with that helps to determine. And not only the people, but like, the reason why they're doing the thing. And I think this is something Julie and I talked a lot about on our meetings and I will really take away with myself, is getting to know why people are doing the work that they are doing, beyond the essays that they can write about their work, or like just like the answers they find on the script, is why are you personally doing this? And in that there will be an emotion, an affection, something that generates movement and then is that movement actually that determines what is the best medium, in terms of like representational, surrealist, in relationship to that movement.

RIMAH: That's really a good answer. [laughs] Julie, when you think of a set design of course you will sometimes read a text, or you meet in the room with the collaborators if it is a creation, uh where do you get your inspiration from when you think of a set design?

JULIE: I think in a way it's kind of going back to what I was talking about before; which is the inspiration starts with kind of understanding what the main idea or the message of the piece is and what my personal connection is to that, and what my collaborator's connection is to that. So it starts from trying to understand a kind of core of the piece. And then the theatre space itself, understanding that space. And then from there it would radiate out to you know the some photographs that I've seen or installation art and I get into excited about the idea of tape, or you

know tin foil, or some materials, and I'm trying to get the director excited about that material too, so you know. It, really, it varies from piece to piece. Each piece is unique the inspiration, source of inspiration, I would say.

RIMAH: Yeah definitely. Bianca, where do you get your inspiration?

BIANCA: Yeah, I think it really changes with time. I think a lot like similarly to Julia on the back and forth with people, and the like subject matter that you find strength of like the lines that create that generate more movement again. And then from there you find, like, a form that has those relationships. Yeah. And then now I'm very inspired by my learnings with Julie, like the awareness of the space, and thinking of the architecture, I think that will change a lot for me the way I'm looking at design, and trying to keep working towards that. And also the notion of emotions, and emotions in relationship to space. And they're essential; like what is the main thing and the more important thing in this design. I think having that level of explicitness in working is my biggest love, my inspiration right now.

RIMAH: Mhmm. Today you finished your last session of phase one, and I know that we don't have theatre now, so maybe you are not busy in the room working, but maybe you are busy with other projects or preparations, so I'm curious to know what you are busy with?

JULIE: Oh well, in a couple of weeks I'm going actually to Montreal to teach in person a couple of directing students at the National Theatre School. And I've been doing this for a number of years. And so yeah. I'm trying to develop new directors this relationship to design, some of the ideas that we've been talking about in this podcast. So that's kind of fun. And in terms — there's maybe a project that it sounds like it may happen; it's a one-woman-show with masks and that will probably happen in the spring. And it's one that we did for many years in the beginning of the 2000s and in Hungary and in Europe as well. And it's really that kind of magic theatre. It's just a simple show, but it's very exciting to think about going back to that piece.

RIMAH: And the show would happen here in Canada?

JULIE: Yeah, in Toronto.

RIMAH: Looking forward to go back to theatre.

JULIE: I know! Yeah. [laughs]

RIMAH: Bianca, what are you busy with right now?

BIANCA: Today I had the first time, I had a rehearsal in a space with masks and distancing for a piece that we hope it will happen in the spring. But because it's more process oriented, we're doing like one phase now. And it's about the "clothing" is the name of the piece, and it's a devised sort of creation where we are trying to understand why we worry so much about the clothes we wear, but so little about the impact of our clothing.

RIMAH: Interesting. I think in the coming year we will see a lot of productions with masks.

BIANCA: Oh yeah. It was very odd to be in a rehearsal room today with people. I mean it was only three of us, with distancing and wearing masks, and then like yeah, there's so many little things you forget.

RIMAH: It will take a little bit of time before we get back to normal, but hopefully soon we will be in the same room, and we will be talking about this in person. Thank you very much for this lovely conversation. I'm also fascinated by set design in general. I really enjoyed talking to you.

BIANCA: Thank you so much!

JULIE: Great. Thank you.

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.