

# Key Change Episode 14: Opera & Space – Scale and Immersion

## SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Debi Wong, Yuval Sharon, Robyn Grant-Moran

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### **Julie Mclsaac** 00:00

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Key Change: A COC Podcast, where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

### **Robyn Grant-Moran** 00:18

We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

### **Julie Mclsaac** 00:21

...and Julie Mclsaac. Today on Episode 14, we're looking at our surroundings in a whole new light as we explore some unique ways that opera can exist outside of the opera house.

### **Robyn Grant-Moran** 00:31

That's right. While darkened auditoriums and soaring concert halls are one way to experience the art form, there are some really exciting things going on right now with site-specific opera and even virtual reality (VR).

### **Julie Mclsaac** 00:43

Yeah, and this goes way beyond opera al fresco; we're not just talking about transplanting traditional productions to outside environments. Creators today are delving into the possibilities that total immersion can offer, and using specific spaces to add layers to the audience experience, and sometimes to reveal things about the operatic works that were always there but maybe we just never noticed.

### **Robyn Grant-Moran** 01:04

Joining us for this episode are two of the industry's most forward thinkers: American opera and theatre director Yuval Sharon, and Canadian interdisciplinary performance artist Debi Wong.

### **Julie Mclsaac** 01:15

We started our exploration by chatting with Yuval, and to catch everyone up on his bio and work to date: Yuval is Artistic Director of The Industry in Los Angeles, which is dedicated to new and experimental opera. He was also recently announced the Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director of Michigan Opera Theatre. Yuval has produced opera in train stations, on sound stages, in moving

vehicles, and all kinds of other non-traditional venues that include warehouses, escalator corridors, and parking lots.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 01:43**

Last fall, he directed a take on [Richard] Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" called "Twilight: Gods." This piece was basically part installation, part drive-through radio broadcast, and it asked audiences to navigate their way through a parking garage for a one-hour English adaptation of the Ring Cycle finale.

**Julie Mclsaac 02:17**

And Yuval received some considerable acclaim for "Sweet Land," another site-specific project, a new opera created to be experienced in L.A's State Historic Park. Here audiences were separated into two groups, and they were physically drawn into exploring several narrative viewpoints about the founding of the U.S. and the erasure of some important truths in American history.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 02:37**

We were curious about what set Yuval on the path to creating and directing this kind of work. So, we began by asking him to share what's been significant in his experiences as an audience member attending immersive performance.

**Yuval Sharon 02:58**

I experienced, you know, an early piece by the company Punchdrunk that did "Sleep No More." I saw them do, sort of, a retelling of "Faust," you know, in London several years ago. I remember that being a very formative experience for me because I thought, "The actual encounter with this work and the actual experience of moving through this building and choosing your own adventure..." I really enjoyed it but I also remember feeling, like, I was hoping for more somehow – or I was hoping for a richer experience or one that was going to be more than just about moving through a space, but also about how that move through a space, you know, could be telling a story. So, the notion that narrative might be able to be transferred from the libretto to the experience of the opera, and then also realizing that that experience of a piece of work, in a way, can be the content of what is actually being described. So, I think that was a fairly formative experience for me. I remember also going to a number of visual art installations around that time, that were about creating environments, and that felt very similar to, sort of, the Punchdrunk pieces. The notion of taking in all three dimensions of the experience – as opposed to sitting and watching something on a stage – to me, there is a challenge as soon as you think about the directionality of the human voice with opera, and that, you know, as soon as we put people on the stage and in the proscenium, you know, there's really only one place that the singers can go... You know, that they need to be heard in one, sort of, direction. So, I mean, I think that as I was developing ideas with my company The Industry in Los Angeles, I did start to think about the introduction of the amplified voice, and the introduction of a voice that can allow for a multi-dimensional experience. But my hope was that that could also open us up to offer not just a cool experience, but also to think about how that experience could be also what we're trying to convey.

**Julie Mclsaac 04:59**

I love that idea that the three-dimensional experience is the content...

**Yuval Sharon** 05:04

Yeah.

**Julie Mclsaac** 05:04

...of the event, of the performance.

**Yuval Sharon** 05:06

I'm somebody who, when I'm in a concert hall, I am looking all around, you know? Probably people that sit behind me must think I'm terribly distracted, but I'm not distracted; I think that one of the exciting things about seeing live performance, one of things we're all missing so terribly is that our gaze is not fixed, you know, the way that it is in cinema, the way that it is in everything that we're watching online, you know? It's, like, in the end, you know, the multiplicity of perspectives that is offered even when we're just sitting in an auditorium, and there's so much going on on-stage, you know, that has been taken away from us in this year, you know? And suddenly, we really are focused in on what the director, or video director, wants us to focus on. But when I'm watching... especially when I watch concerts, you know, in a concert hall, I am looking around at the lighting, I'm reading in my program, I'm hopping around, my gaze, kind of, jumps from the person who's playing maybe the solo to the person who's cleaning their instrument at that moment, you know? And that is actually a really wonderful mode of seeing, I think. And I think that somehow certainly in the last period of time, when film has become a more prominent art form, I think that we tend to confuse what happens on stage with a, kind of, cinematic approach, which means that it's all about "Everyone needs to focus on one thing at a time," and I find that utterly dull, you know? And that the notion that we can offer so many possibilities, simultaneously – not creating a chaos or not creating a company by any means but instead thinking that there are lots of different perspectives. And the more that we can hold different perspectives, the more exciting and the more relevant, I think, opera is. I'd like to see opera being connected into the immersive environment that is our everyday lives. So, in L.A., it's been about doing operas in the operating train stations, you know, while people are coming and going. Or it's been, you know, in a moving vehicle, you know, with the singers in the moving vehicle with you and, as you're turning and looking, the life of the city is happening outside of you. So, it's not being immersed into another fiction; it's actually being immersed and realizing the possibilities in the world around us that's been so interesting for me.

**Julie Mclsaac** 07:33

I can't help but think about Sweet Land. And, so, in this production, it seems to me that audiences are implicated in the action.

**Yuval Sharon** 07:40

That they absolutely are.

**Julie Mclsaac** 07:42

...and around them, and that they're being set up to, sort of, feel some accountability perhaps...

**Yuval Sharon** 07:46

Yes.

**Julie Mclsaac** 07:46

...and to participate in a way in this allegory of colonialism. And we had a previous podcast guest, musicologist Rena Roussin, who actually brought this into the conversation when we were talking about opera and activism.

**Yuval Sharon** 07:57

Nice.

**Julie Mclsaac** 07:58

So, we'd love to know: what do you think – specifically with experiential works like Sweet Land – what is it about them that can bring audiences into current and important cultural conversations?

**Yuval Sharon** 08:09

Oh, yeah. Thank you so much. It's a great assessment of a really key aspect of what Sweet Land was about. I think there's a very important distinction to be made between the, kind of, activist approach, and then the artistic imperative of creating a work of art, you know? There are places where they overlap and I think they're really important and necessary places where they diverge. I would never deign to call myself an activist, even if I'm, you know... Like, an activist is someone who's actually not just making a work of art but really really putting their their life on the line for change, you know, like, on a systemic and policy level. So, even though I do feel very politically engaged as an individual, there is something different that happens when I'm creating a work of art, which means that it has to hold a lot of different – and sometimes contradictory – perspectives. But one of the things that I think is an inherently political act is questioning our notion of spectatorship. Sweet Land was, by definition, a project in which you could not be a passive spectator, you know: you were on the move, and you were constantly, you know, pushed from basically one location to another, and your experience of Sweet Land was inherently different from at least half of the audience in a very obvious way, because half the audience went down one path and saw one story, and then half the audience went down another path and saw another story, all under the title of Sweet Land, you know? So, two people that, I guess, saw the same opera, kind of, didn't see the same opera, you know? And that in a way, in its formal conceit, it's, kind of, what I said earlier about that form actually being the content, you know? That formal experience ends up being so much of what we're trying to convey as it relates to issues of nationhood, and relations of indigeneity, and all of those, kind of, notions that have been unexplored or not explored enough, you know, by the dominant culture, and certainly not by opera. So, I think that all of that is a way of saying the way that Sweet Land was experienced was, in every way, an encapsulation and a microcosm of the very ideas that we were hoping to express with Sweet Land.

**Julie Mclsaac** 10:37

The notion of spectatorship and what that means, and angle, and lens and, what you come to the performance with in terms of your cultural background, in terms of your privilege.

**Yuval Sharon** 10:46

That's absolutely right. There's a French philosopher whose name is Jacques Rancière, and his work has been very inspirational for me, early on and remains so. And he wrote a fantastic book called The

Emancipated Spectator. He said that sometimes what seems to be active spectatorship is actually another form of passivity, and when I heard that, I really thought, "Oh, that's what I struggle with, with a lot of, kind of, immersive projects," because yes, it may seem like you are choosing your own adventure, but actually, you know, there is an inherent passivity to the experience in terms of how much you actually affect the experience in any particular way, you know, and is that even desirable, you know? And what is often called "passive," meaning sitting in a theatre, isn't there a lot of activity possible within just having one fixed perspective in a seat in an auditorium. Exactly what you said, Julie, of, like, you know, you're still constantly going back and forth between what you're seeing on stage and your own experiences, you know? And that actually, you know, is a big shaper of the experience, you know, and that's something that I always go back to and think about. And realizing that we can't assume anybody's background and how they are going to engage with the particular piece that you put in front of them, you know? And so, somehow you have to create a space in which you are saying something very decisive, but not exclusionary. So, these are all, in the end, political questions even if they end up being quite different from activism.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 12:37

Now, before the pandemic, you were going to take a sabbatical in Japan, I understand.

**Yuval Sharon** 12:42

Yes, yes.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 12:43

Yeah. So, instead, you stayed here and put on one of the most ambitious of opera staged in North America during the last year. And I'm wondering: why is taking risks and doing new things in art so important during times of crisis?

**Yuval Sharon** 13:00

I think the short answer to that is it's always an important time, you know? There's never a wrong time to take a risk; I think if you stop taking risks, you're not doing art, you know, because it's, like, you know, this goes back to, kind of, a fundamental question I've been thinking about a lot, you know: is opera an art form that affirms what we know? You know, is it an art form that is about a, kind of, confirmation? Because that comes with it a lot of things that I don't think we want to affirm anymore – or, that we don't want to confirm this, kind of, like... You know, there's a lot in opera that is hierarchical, that is colonialist, that is exclusionary, you know? And, so, if we're affirming a certain vision of the past, we're also affirming all of that. So, I don't think that that is the way that opera can go; instead, to me, the opposite of that is an opera that is about potentiality, and about possibility, and is about projecting an idea. And that, I think, is way more interesting and way more exciting, and that makes opera an art form of the imagination, and that's the kind of opera that I am... And that is inherently risky, too, because that means you're not relying on the way things were done, you know? And even if it is a standard repertoire piece, it's a classic opera, all the more reason to take even more risks with it, right? So, in Detroit next year, we're going to reopen the theatre... I'm glad you mentioned *Twilight: Gods*, and I'm happy to talk about that more, but I'm thinking ahead now to our next season, our upcoming year, and one of the projects that we announced was a piece that I'll direct, [Giacomo] Puccini's "*La Bohème*," that we're going to do in reverse order: we're going to start with Act Four, and then we're gonna do Act Three, and

then we're going to do Act Two, and then we're going to do Act One. So, we end with Mimì and Rodolfo in love and singing "O soave fanciulla," and their voices from off-stage is how the opera is going to end. I think this is an idea that I have been developing for a long time now but its time has absolutely come for so many reasons. And, you know, in many ways, I put the idea out there, I thought it was a really big risk – I actually wasn't sure if Michigan Opera Theatre was ready to take this kind of risk because, you know, this is really a departure in a big way, you know? Even if, you know, that actually, visually it's going to be 19th century France, you know, but the storytelling is going to be totally different. And I am just thrilled that everybody is excited about it. You know, I mean, I was ready for people to be, you know, ripping up their digital programs, and, you know, being upset about it, and I don't know. All I've heard is incredible curiosity and enthusiasm, and it reminds me that, you know, audiences want things that are different, and exciting, and new, you know? Even if it's something that they find familiar, you know? I think there is somehow a perception of the audience that people get really tripped up on. And I see leadership – I see my role as an artistic leader – is to excite people for the kind of things that they never even knew were possible. I'm not saying, "I want to do every opera backwards" by any means, you know? Like, I do understand that this is a very, you know, strong step in the direction I want to go, and it's also very much not just about me; I mean, that's me as a director, what interests me about La Bohème and how I think La Bohème has so much unexplored territory, because it's so often done in a pretty rote way, you know? Because it's so beloved and, you know, it kind of does itself in so many ways, you know? Which means that it's been unexplored for so long and it has become a, kind of, ossified cliché, you know? And it's not fair to poor Puccini, you know. As a playlist, when I hear it in reverse order, I just think, "What amazing moments I've never noticed before," you know, because I just, kind of, go with the flow of hearing it, you know? And suddenly, all of these incredible little moments, you know, are heard in a brand new way, and I think, for me, when it comes to standard repertoire, that is my real goal: I want to be able to offer it in a new way, in a way that is totally loving of the work, you know; it's not a destruction of the work, it's not a deconstruction out of doubt in the work's validity; it's actually a total affirmation of the work's validity. But I know, in the case of the Bohème, it's going to be such a memorable experience, you know? And even if people say, "I can't wait to see it again in the normal order," that's fine, you know; they'll have a chance to do that – you know, like, La Bohème isn't going anywhere. But I'm also just so thrilled that we'll be doing the second production of Anthony Davis's opera "[X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X]"... ..immediately after that, you know what I mean? So, those two pieces to me, those are the two pieces that we'll do in our theatre; the other pieces of we'll do will be in various other venues because of the pandemic primarily, you know?

**Julie Mclsaac** 18:03

Yes.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 18:15

It seems like now is the time where theatre is so unfamiliar, by virtue of the fact that we've been shut out, that everybody will be exploring theatre as a new concept again once we all go back in. But to go back outside the opera house, I'm wondering: what location would you love to set an opera [in] but that you haven't yet?

**Yuval Sharon** 18:39

Oh, there's so many. I mean, you know, there's so many places that are possible. I mean, one of the things that I'm interested in, in Detroit, all of the, kind of, sites that have an incredible history, you know? For a while, Detroit was considered the, kind of, "Paris of America" because of all of these incredible, incredible buildings from the 20s, you know, in 30s, a lot of which are still standing, some of which are in some kind of "in between" stage, you know? And I think that notion of these sites that have history, and spaces that have a, kind of, resonance within the life of the city, those are sites that I really want to take opera to. So, I think every city has within it probably some place in which the live performance can be a layer, you know, that can help excavate some of these historical ideas. Certainly in the case of Sweet Land, the opera I did here in Los Angeles, that was a big part of it. You know, thinking about how this live performance becomes a trace on a piece of land that has within it these incredible and traumatic stories that are not told often enough, you know? And, so, what does it mean to just point our attention to that, and thinking about the role of mythmaking in the stories that we tell about ourselves? I don't think every piece needs to be doing that but I also think that there is so much... Let me put it this way: there's this great quote by John Cage, which I've always loved, which is "The notion that theatre is all around us, and art's role is merely to point us to that fact," you know? He puts it much more beautifully than I did just now. So, it's not a direct quote but the sentiment is something I really, really believe in.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 20:44

It was so great chatting with Yuval!

**Julie Mclsaac** 20:46

Yeah, like, not only joining us from L.A., but the fact that he's going to be in Detroit, which is actually so close to Toronto.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 20:52

Right? And I was just so taken with the idea of Bohème backwards – like, taking this very standard work and turning it around. And, you know, after we talked to him, I went and reordered it in my playlist and listened it backwards...

**Julie Mclsaac** 20:56

Oh, you did?!

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 21:13

...and it completely changed how I understood the opera. And I think there's such a power in that in taking these old ideas and sprucing them up – especially right now when we're caught in our homes, we're in lockdown, our lives are flat and disconnected, and, you know, it's really easy to forget that there's joy in things. And when you listen to Bohème backwards, it makes you ask, "Was the pain worth it?" And it absolutely was.

**Julie Mclsaac** 21:51

Yeah, that's beautiful. And, as a director, I often find myself thinking of what specifically I want the audience to be seeing, or hearing, or experiencing at any given moment. But the idea of creating a performance scenario with the express goal of allowing each person to edit their own experience, to

guide their eyes and ears, or purposefully creating or reordering things to bring about that new understanding, or that new way of experiencing it, I think it's a wonderful new way of looking at things and it's going to be staying with me for a long time. And, of course, our second guest is taking things to the next level when it comes to new ground for staging opera.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 22:26**

Debi Wong is a Canadian mezzo-soprano who is the Founder and Artistic Director of re:Naissance Opera. The company is based in Vancouver [BC], where their activity is driven by local artists with a commitment to equity, intersectionality, innovation, and collaboration.

**Julie Mclsaac 22:41**

In 2014, they tackled cyberbullying in an interactive social media opera called "#DidoAndAeneas," and the production was the first to use social media and instant messaging to interact with the audience through a virtual world outside of the performance.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 22:56**

Debi's company has also done some work with opera told through podcasts, which we'll dig into a bit later. And she recently became Creative Director of Orpheus VR, a project currently in development. The virtual experience is based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and plays like a "choose your own adventure" opera, complete with moral implications. With the many industry hats that she's worn, we started by asking Debi about her journey down all these different pathways.

**Debi Wong 23:30**

As a young singer, I was really interested in stories and the kinds of stories we were telling on stages, and what agency I had over storytelling as an emerging artist, emerging performer and singer. And I came to it from the Baroque, early music, historically informed performance practice (whatever you want to call it!) genre, and what I loved about studying music in that context was the, sort of, historical context that we were encouraged to engage with. But as I, kind of, started, like, you know, settling into myself and my own artistic ideas, I realized that it didn't feel like there was a lot of room for my own forms of storytelling within the, kind of, framework of being a classical singer, as I understood it as an emerging singer. And that very much led to me wanting to create my own company, or my own platform, for experimenting with these new storytelling ideas. And I, sort of, did two things simultaneously: one, was I started a PhD program in Finland at the Sibelius Academy, and the other was I formed re:Naissance Opera, and both were, kind of, experimental playgrounds for me. As a doctoral student, I was bringing more physicality into my practice, I was taking improv classes, and trying out all different kinds of artistic experiences to inform my art making. And then with re:Naissance, I was looking at the bigger picture and how I could fit into the, kind of, cultural landscape we are all weaving together across these lands that we colonially call Canada. And that's, sort of, how I ended up as a producer, which is, for me, kind of, taking this, sort of, creative bird's eye view/look at things and thinking about how I can bring different people, different artists, different ideas into the operatic sector to tell new stories and create new stories. And one of the questions we like to throw around a lot is "What would opera look like if it were invented today?" And that is how we, sort of, end up in this other realm of art making, which is bringing in digital artists and thinking about online and digital content as well.



**Julie Mclsaac** 25:47

Thank you for bringing that question into the conversation of "What would it look like if it was created here and now today?" That's a great a great thing to ponder. And having met you through sort of Vancouver's indie opera scene, I know we're all just so grateful for your leadership, and your creativity, and advocacy – so, it's really great to have this opportunity to chat with you and to introduce our listeners to you as well. Now, as someone who's been on every side of the stage – you've been in the in the audience, on stage, behind the scenes producing – how do you find that each perspective shapes your decisions and experiences in the other areas?

**Debi Wong** 26:20

Yeah, I actually think that that's such an important thing for all artists, or audience members, or creators, because I think the performance, just in general, is a really beautiful space for community; it's a beautiful space where we bring people in from all different walks of life, whether they've had a great day, a bad day, whether they identify as an artist or not. And we are all collaborators: we all enter into this, sort of, social contract to be together for this certain amount of time, in this certain storytelling context, and we're all going to, kind of, like, give into the make believe or whatever it is that we are co-creating that day. And, so, having the experience as the "audience-co-creator," or as the "composer-co-creator," or the "co-creator-co-creator" – whatever you want to call those roles – is so important if we are going to continue fostering these really meaningful social interactions that happen in performance. And I think that's something that I try to, kind of, hold on to as we are creating new works, or commissioning new works.

**Julie Mclsaac** 27:21

I'm just really curious: when you first moved away from being just a performer and started to get into those other fields of practice, were there any particularly illuminating experiences that you had?

**Debi Wong** 27:31

One of the big things that I feel is really becoming clear now is that we... And I do not have a fixed idea of what opera has to look and sound like, but I do have a very fixed idea of what the process should look like, or feel like and, in that way, I'm sort of thinking about opera as a tool that we use to bring communities together – these communities that I just, kind of, alluded to – to bring communities together and to co-create and tell stories together. And how what that story ends up looking like is very much a product of whoever's in the room at that time, and who we've taken care to invite into that room. And I think that's the "aha" moment that I had: if we're using opera as a tool, if we're really thinking about the process and how we are inviting people and artists into that process, then what we come out with is going to be very different storytelling, musical operatic experiences, and they can all coexist together without taking away from one version of what we think opera is.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 28:38

Now you've really invited audiences in to participate in 2014 and #DidoAndAeneas through the use of instant messaging and social media to involve the audience in the story, and to help develop the world outside of the performance. Can you tell us more about how that worked?

**Debi Wong 28:56**

That was such a fun production. It was my very first thing – like, a larger production – as a producer, and performer, and, you know, script writer/dramaturg. And the idea was "How can we look at this story, Dido and Aeneas, which is told all the time – especially the opera by [Henry] Purcell, it's performed everywhere consistently – how can we look at that story and tell it today in a way that makes sense and resonates with people and, kind of, step away from that damsel in distress sort of image of Dido that we get all the time, and the, sort of, like, evil sorceress and these kind of stereotypes that are really persistent in our field?" And, at the heart of that story, I realized it's about someone who is getting bullied for her life choices, basically. And that's something that, as a female-identifying person I experience quite often, you know? There's all these ideas of what I should be or shouldn't be and, you know, we're used to this. But I wanted to, kind of, pull that idea through the story and, at the time we were creating it, I remember I was standing on a subway platform in New York and I saw this (she looked like she was about nine years old) girl with her grandma, and her grandma kept asking her, like, "What's wrong, what's wrong, what's wrong?" And this little girl finally said, "I'm getting hate-tweeted!" And this, like, broke my heart – I was like, "This, like, young, young person is getting hate-tweeted!" And, so, this was when cyberbullying was just kind of becoming like a really known issue, but for older generations, it's just completely baffling and, like, nobody understands what that means, and this grandmother didn't know. And, so, I saw an opportunity there to bring cyberbullying into the forefront of this conversation because that is how we bully people these days; this is how we, you know... it's still happening so much. And, so, what we did with that production is Dido was the subject of cyberbullying and, you know, one of her colleagues at school thought that she wasn't cool enough and decided to, kind of, like, just start poking fun at her online, and when she falls in love with one of the popular people at school, this bully gets a photo of her and posts it all over social media. And what happened in the production is that we set it in a bar in real time, so, it was site-specific but, at the door, everyone left their phone numbers to be on a group chat. And so our tech person was live-chatting with the audience, and it was coming from the perspective of the bully, like, behind Dido's back. So, if you're in the audience, you're seeing your notifications, you're seeing your social media being populated with these really, you know, awful things that are said all the time, and also photographs of her, and you get the sense of, like, you're participating in it, and "it's fun because we're in a performance," but then you're seeing the effects of it on stage as well and it, kind of, creates that conversation of understanding now what that is, and seeing the effects play out in front of you.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 32:08**

We don't get to see the effects of bullying, like, cyberbullying in real-time, and this is an example of you get to see, in a dramatized fashion, the immediate impact. And I'm wondering how audiences reacted to that?

**32:24**

Yeah, the production was really well received, and, you know, famously at the end of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, Dido kills herself, and the way we translated that was to the implication of like serious self-harm, which is what we see as the effects of cyberbullying. And, so, that's what we left the audience with: with this image of this, kind of, vibrant, young woman who is just, you know, enjoying high school and figuring out what it means to, kind of, go out into the world as an independent person, but being thwarted by this online bullying, and then seeing the effects of that, and how it, like, physically

is affecting her and emotionally. And the audiences received it really well; I think we did three nights and it quickly sold out, so, we were really sad that we didn't actually have a longer run. And people had lots of great questions for us afterwards and, because it was in the social setting, everyone, kind of, stayed afterwards until they got kicked out of the bar to have drinks, and talk about what they were seeing, and why. And we had information on cyberbullying in the program notes as well, so they had everything, sort of, there to really understand it, and I think it was a positive impact.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 33:47

I was listening to a podcast about Amanda Todd, and thinking about Rehtaeh Parsons, and, like, Dido wasn't that much older in the story than these girls, and we forget that because we have this, like, "Oh, well, she's a queen." Like, she must have been, like, maybe not geriatric but fully mature...

**Debi Wong** 34:10

Yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 34:10

...mature adult and she wouldn't have been; she was very young.

**Debi Wong** 34:14

Yeah. And the other thing about Dido, too, is that, you know, she decides to kill herself in the opera and in this version of the myth because of the dishonour it's going to bring her when Aeneas decides to leave and not marry her or stay by her side. And that really translates to a lot of experiences that female-identifying people have today – that our choices are not valid by society standards and therefore we will be shamed.

**Julie Mclsaac** 34:45

And I was just thinking about how high school can be a very stratified world in terms of hierarchies, and the pressures of that, and the comparisons that can be drawn to a setting where there are these social hierarchies in terms of royalty, with the pecking order [that] is there. Like that...

**Debi Wong** 35:01

Yeah

**Julie Mclsaac** 35:01

...strikes me as a really powerful corollary.

**Debi Wong** 35:04

Yeah, exactly. And it's also just such a place where we really start digging into our identity, like, as young people, and where a lot of it's formed and informed as well – or at least that first, sort of, layer. So, yeah, it did work really well!

**Julie Mclsaac** 35:21

I didn't get to see that when it was first done in Vancouver and I'd love to hear of it coming back in order to take part of that experience.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 35:28**

It reminds me of, like, a 21st century morality play but minus the incredible religious fervour!

**Debi Wong 35:38**

Yes. I love that. Yeah, I hope I can remount it one day.

**Julie McIsaac 35:44**

And, sort of, bringing us a bit closer to what you're currently working on, Debi: we know that you're doing some pretty exciting things right now involving opera and virtual reality, which for many people, might not be things that ever align in their minds when they think about those two forms. Could you describe to us your work in VR?

**Debi Wong 36:03**

This is definitely one of those things that emerged from bringing in new artists into the art form. And I described the virtual reality experience as a "choose your own adventure meets epic opera." And, again, we asked our team, like, "What would opera look like if it were created or invented today?" and we kind of, like, hooked on to the ideas from the early Baroque days of Western opera being born, of audiences being immersed in these really larger than life stories, and these performances by actors that would just bring audiences to tears and just draw everyone in. And we came up with the idea of virtual reality because you literally are completely immersed in a story world. Music naturally does that for us but, in terms of, like, the visuals and the graphics, virtual reality lets us be inside another universe wholly. And that was really exciting to me, as was the idea of using motion capture, which is basically a recording system that records the body movements and facial movements of a live actor. And being able to motion capture and facial capture opera singers, bringing to life, like, mythological creatures inside of an immersive, like, fantasy universe just sounded so nerdy and so fun. And then we took it one step further and decided that it would be even more fun if the audience could, again, kind of, feel like they are co-creators in the experience, and so we give them agency in this experience: they can interact with elements in the world and it changes the orchestration they will hear, they can choose which branching storylines to follow. So, each operatic experience is unique to their, kind of, inputs into the story.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 37:59**

How long does it take to make something like that?

**Debi Wong 38:04**

Well, it's hard to say because, you know, it's, kind of, a first of its kind that, you know? There's been operatic experiences or performances where there's motion capture people, and they're in a virtual world in real time, and that's kind of a known pipeline. But in terms of creating, like, for example, an interactive score, our composer Brian Topp – who was already working in virtual reality, composition, and audio experiences – he has so many things to think about when he's composing; he can't just write a score, he has to write, like, every single moment that happens. And it's not a linear thing, it's a very, sort of, stacked up process. So, you know, if I'm the audience member, and I decide to stand around for an extra five minutes, he has to have music for that extra five minutes. Or if I decide to blast through the

experience in two minutes flat, then he has to just, like, have a, you know, musical narrative that'll still hang together for all of those kinds of parameters. And, so, we have to work as a team very in, like, "intertwinedly" – that's not a word. But we're, like, on meetings all the time and every single minute of content that we get through has to be done together. So, it's a good thing we mostly get along. I'm just kidding: we get along! I love my team, they're the best!

**Julie Mclsaac** 39:22

What would you say are the next steps for that project?

**Debi Wong** 39:25

Well, we are finishing the... we call it "opera industry ready prototype" this week – fingers crossed, knock on wood, please let us make this deadline! We're finishing it this week, so, then we are hoping to send it out to anyone who has access to a headset and is able to test it for us and give us feedback. Because, you know, what I love about working with digital tech artists (I don't know what to call them. I don't know what to call it.

**Julie Mclsaac** 39:55

Brand new field!

**Debi Wong** 39:56

I know! I'm like, "My digital opera tech artists?" I don't know.

**Julie Mclsaac** 39:59

I love it.

**Debi Wong** 40:00

But what I love about working with all of these artists and these collaborators is that they come from a very different way of doing things. And, so, there's this constant, like, process of iterating, and making mistakes, and trying things out, and letting people in to give us feedback right away. And there's a lot of value placed on that. And that's such a great change from, you know, as a classical singer, I spend, like, you know, like, maybe three hours a day locked in a room with no windows trying to figure out "How's my sound? Okay?" and then eventually, I'm going to perform something for a bunch of people, and then they're going to judge me on it, and it feels horrible most of the time. But, so, coming from that kind of, like, you know, tradition into this, like, "Let's make something messy, get people to tell us what works and doesn't work, and then let's keep going and do that whole process again," is really cool and informative. So, we finally have a full prototype for people to test out, and we're gonna see what happens when we get that feedback and then get back into development.

**Julie Mclsaac** 40:59

Yeah, and based on your findings and experiences thus far: how do you think VR could be functioning in opera's not-too-distant future?

**Debi Wong** 41:09

Yeah, virtual reality, during the pandemic, especially, it's been really neat to be in that space because I, you know... with working with other VR people we often meet in the virtual world – so, put on the headset and we're meeting in these social VR spaces. And I thought, it's just going to, kind of, feel like another Zoom thing where you're on a flat screen and doing your thing. But it's actually so fun because sometimes I will meet with my friends in their, like, brand newly created worlds that they've just put together, and they'll take me for a tour on their beautiful worlds, and it'll just be like, "Oh, great, I'm just literally traveling around in an imaginary universe right now," and you see people's physical movements, and you still see them on a, you know, 2D screen of course, but there's something that's still much more embodied about virtual reality experiences. And, so, it'll be really interesting to see how we can, you know, capitalize on that and bring it into the operatic space when we are in these times where we really can't connect or be in physical space. And then also find out how it can just be incorporated into what we're doing so that it can open up the ability for people across the globe to access each other, or access performers and performances. without all of the travel and, you know, the eco[logical] footprints that that comes with.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 42:28

It sounds like a great tool for accessibility, as well.

**Debi Wong** 42:32

Accessibility and VR is a really interesting topic right now because, for example, I do work with some deaf artists and I can't bring them into the virtual world because there isn't really great ways for us to be able to sign and communicate using sign language because of the hand tracking things in virtual reality experiences. And, so, there's a lot of conversation about accessibility right now but, as you said, for people who are living with disabilities and are physically incapable of attending a concert, or going out every night to, you know, to a venue, this is a great way of just immersing them in that world and bringing them in.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 43:13

re:Naissance Opera is also doing some interesting things with the podcast format, in terms of podcast as [the] primary vehicle for delivering artistic content. Well, I'm wondering: what's different when an opera is being created specifically for a podcast experience?

**Debi Wong** 43:29

Well, I think, again, this was one of those things where we brought in a bunch of really amazing, amazing, amazing artists from all different disciplines, all different walks of life, and we had an opportunity to say, like, "What can we create together?" and we were working within the confines of the pandemic. Originally, we were going to be producing an in-person, live indie opera festival called "Indie Fest," which we run every year. And, so, when the pandemic hit, we had to quickly shift and figure out "How will we direct our resources now, so that we are still bringing in as many artists as we can? And what can we create that's going to be able to enter into an already saturated digital space?" You know, we don't have the capacity to make huge livestream, multi-camera experiences – it's beyond us – and I just happened to know some really great podcast producers, some really great composers, really great writers, and the idea of an audio drama came up as a really natural, kind of, like, stepping stone; it's something we can all do from our homes or with limited bodies in a physical recording space, and it is

already an oral, sort of, audio experience. And, so, bringing the operatic drama and mindsets and tools to that process seemed really, kind of, a natural thing to do. And I think what was special about this podcast is that we intentionally brought together this team of really diverse people, and we went through this process of really building trust in the ensemble, and building trust amongst each other, and with the other artists we wanted to bring in. And we were struggling with really big questions at the time, like, you know, just first of all being artists and losing all our work but, at the same time, with the implications and impacts of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise in acknowledging that systemic racism exists in our world. And for a team that is predominantly people of colour. These things were heavy and they were challenging to deal with because we were coming from all different backgrounds. You know, I come from Chinese settler background, but some of my colleagues are Indigenous, and some of my other colleagues are White males and, you know, like, we all had very different experiences of what was going on. And having to come into community and conversation with each other, and trust each other enough to have those difficult conversations, and then to create a story about the future we wanted together, was really beautiful and challenging in the best way possible, I think. And I think that was the best part about creating this podcast: was that it was a safe format for us to work in but it enabled these really important conversations and a new community of artists to emerge from it.

**Julie Mclsaac 46:36**

Yeah, I was looking at the list of everyone who's involved, some of whom I know and have worked with personally, and some of them I don't. But I just looked at that list and I thought, "What a fantastic team of incredible voices and perspectives that you have working on that." And hello to everyone – hi, Jess [Schacht] and hi, Renae [Morrisseau], and everyone who's working on that piece! Before we let you go, Debi, are there other works in development or that you're aware of that are exciting you right now? Particularly when you think of new ways of imagining scale and immersive capacities in opera.

**Debi Wong 47:06**

So, right now, at re:Naissance, we have a few different projects that are coming up the pipeline, and one of the ones I'm really excited about is a livestream using some of our computer-created avatars. So, we're going to be looking at having these livestreamed, 2D performances but with opera singers animating avatars designed by our 3D artists. So, I'm really excited about this. It's going to, sort of, exist in the Orpheus VR universe but it's called "Live from the Underworld," and it's a broadcast from Persephone and all these people and inhabitants in the underworld. And we're aiming for Halloween, so, I'm very excited; I hope people will show up in costumes and, whether we're in person or online, we can still have a Halloween party. But I'm also really interested – and I'm biased because I'm producing it – but I'm really loving the ASL [American Sign Language] opera that is being created right now by Landon Krentz and Monique Holt. And what they're playing with is, first of all, breaking down the barriers of what our voices are, because as hearing people we think about our voices as something that... we, you know, make sound and [it] comes out into the world. But what Landon has taught me is that, you know, there are people who hear with their eyes, and I love this idea that he's, kind of, opened my mind to and I hadn't seen things in that way before because of my own ignorances. And, so, we're talking about singers who are signing and the similarities between ASL poetry and musical rhythm. And Monique, the librettist, is diving into this idea of creating new mythologies for Deaf communities, and what it means to not have stories, and deaf people represented in our cultural narratives, and how we

can create more fairy tales and myths to give honour and shed light on those lived experiences. So, I'm super excited to see that come to life in the next couple of years as well.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 49:14**

You know, after talking to Debi and Yuval, I really feel like immersive theatre is, kind of, having its moment right now: we're so disconnected from our own lives. Like, I barely leave my apartment except when I have to – I have to walk my dog. I don't know. Do you go out much, Julie?

**Julie Mclsaac 49:33**

I don't but, like, what you're saying about immersive theatre having its moment is, in the past, when I thought about immersive performances, I thought about those times where I was, like, squished in really tightly with a group of people, like, in a weird room and I couldn't quite see, and then you got dragged down the hall to this other thing. Whereas what this has revealed to me is immersive can take all these different shapes, and forms, and it has nothing to do necessarily with physical proximity.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 49:56**

Right! And, like you said, we don't get to experience theatre or immersive theatre as we did before. When I think about immersive theater, I really low-key think about Robert Wilson and everything facing forward as, like, "We're working in this very functional, rigid defined space." You turn everyone forward and it makes the audience, sort of, omniscient because you're seeing everybody's emotions at the same time. Then you have the really next-level kind of immersive theatre, where you are going to different locations, and you're jammed in together, and you're being led around, and that's, like, the next level. But then what Yuval and Debi are doing is, like, completely, like, out of the stratosphere compared to that. And it feels like it couldn't really be possible to do at the extent they're doing it being embraced the way it is right now because, like, we aren't living our lives the way we normally do. Like, we go through our own personal tragedies, for example – like, COVID has brought a lot of death to people's lives and people are not able to experience funerals, and people are not able to experience the joys like weddings, births, visiting babies. Like, we're doing this all in a very mediated flat through-the-screen kind of fashion.

**Julie Mclsaac 51:27**

If at all, right?

**Robyn Grant-Moran 51:28**

If at all, yeah! And, so, it feels like immersive theatre is, sort of, an antidote to that? Outside is safe, safer.

**Julie Mclsaac 51:42**

Right, to attend an artistic... Yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 51:45**

Yeah. Like, being inside with people is very dangerous right now. But being in a park, being in your car in a parking garage...



**Julie Mclsaac** 51:54

Right.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 51:54

Like these are safer things.

**Julie Mclsaac** 51:57

Putting on a headset and just entering a virtual world.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 52:00

Exactly! And it's, kind of, a safer space, yet completely wild and creative and new. Like, it's almost like the Wild West, in a sense at the same time.

**Julie Mclsaac** 52:16

And it can be very rich.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 52:18

Mm hmm.

**Julie Mclsaac** 52:19

Yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 52:19

Absolutely.

**Julie Mclsaac** 52:20

experience. What Debi was saying about the team that she put together for the podcast – so, another way of experiencing art – was that they were reckoning with the past and the present and some difficult things around that, to then create a story about the future. I was also really struck by what Debi shared in that it's, like, we get these people together to work on a project, some of whom have never worked in opera before, and then we create a process that's going to feel good to us, and feel inclusive and supportive of the artists, but then we don't know what's going to result! So, there's this openness about the result and the possibilities there, which reminds me about what Yuval was saying about "potentiality," and getting excited about audiences getting excited to experience something they didn't even know could exist.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 53:00

And, like, that all, kind of, comes back to what Debi said about "What if opera was completely contemporary?" What would that look like..."

**Julie Mclsaac** 53:09

Yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 53:09

"...if we didn't have this rigid idea of 'opera must be x, y, and z' based on things that were done 300 years ago."

**Julie Mclsaac** 53:19

And in that re-exploration, I love what Yuval said about how that can be loving, so, that these aren't, like, violent deconstructions for the sake of violent deconstruction, but it comes from a place of love in the sense of not thinking that the original work is invalid in any way, but because of the love he bears for the art form, he wants to see "What has it not yet revealed to us about itself?"

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 53:40

Right. I mean, I can't imagine to go back to Bohème backwards. I can't imagine thinking to do that, if you didn't absolutely love the source.

**Julie Mclsaac** 53:49

Yeah, yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 53:51

Like, that to me seems like a complete active affection and curiosity.

**Julie Mclsaac** 53:58

And it seems like he's approaching it, yeah, with such tenderness for the characters, and for the original story, and the original music, that it's coming from that, yeah, like you said, affection. That's really beautiful. Now, I'm curious, Robyn, what Yuval was saying about, you know, we asked him, like, "Where would you like to set an opera that you haven't yet?" and he said that what he's drawn to is these historical places in a city that have resonance for the city – in terms of the history of that place, in terms of the stories that have yet to be told or aren't told enough. Like, when you heard that thinking about, like, a Toronto context, what came to mind for you?

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 54:32

I thought about the idea of setting things in Black Creek Pioneer Village or Fort York, and places that have a lot of history behind them and not often pleasant histories. But how you can really bring things to life with immersive theatre and engage with things, and reckon with things very differently. Like, for example, two summers ago, I went to see this project called Circus Riot, and it was about a true bit of Ontario history that involved some clowns getting into a fight at a brothel. But it was this hilarious bit of history. It was produced at The Junction, in a parking lot, and you basically, you know, you started in the tent and went through what the circus was like at that time. And then you got shuffled off to the brothel, to the bar, where there were pole dancers, and there was beer-drinking and peanut-eating. And then you got to go out and riot. So, you got to really engage with this history and be part of it, and understand it. And as absurd and as silly as the story was, it was just a really cool way to understand history.

**Julie Mclsaac** 56:02

Right.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 56:03**

And it wasn't this one-dimensional, on a page in a history book; it was this real, living, breathing thing that happened. And you could understand it as happening, and how and why it happened.

**Julie Mclsaac 56:17**

I'm glad to, like, talk about the Toronto context because I was really drawn to the fact that "Okay, Yuval's done this stuff in L.A., and then he's gonna be in Detroit, and then Debi's on the west coast in Vancouver," and I was struck by how they really use the specific places and the specific artists in their communities to do their work, and yet, there's principles to what they're doing that could be applied to any community globally. And, so, I appreciate you making the Toronto connection for us to, like, "Here's an example of this kind of thing happening here," or for listeners to start thinking about "What are the possibilities in terms of staging these kinds of works here in the city?"

**Robyn Grant-Moran 56:50**

And, as a director, how would you approach immersive theatre? Where would you put it?

**Julie Mclsaac 56:57**

I think, like, what's coming to mind for me initially is not so much about a specific place, but about the idea of surrendering control, which is really interesting to me in the sense of putting down some foundational groundwork – because you want the experience to be meaningful and you're going to make conscious choices about the "who," and the "where," and the "why," and, yet, really wanting to leave all that space for the audience to have control over their experience to a certain extent. I agree with you about Black Creek Village and those places where, for the last century or so, it's been like, "This is history." It's been, like, a very rigid, perhaps, and not so alive telling of history, that the idea that by virtue of having a live storytelling event happen in those places, that it just humanizes things as well, because I think that's the trouble, I think, with the history book approach.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 57:54**

And it's so mediated, too. Like, when history is written in a book, it's written with a very specific agenda...

**Julie Mclsaac 58:01**

Yeah.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 58:03**

...by a very specific group. And by virtue of bringing it to life, you're giving audiences different perspectives.

**Julie Mclsaac 58:13**

Yeah,

**Robyn Grant-Moran 58:14**

Making it easier to question.

**Julie Mclsaac** 58:16

I think about the CN Tower, and I think about Toronto Island, particularly the fact that they're on the Waterfront, that they're connected with the waterways, like, just thinking traditionally, and over millennia, how those places might have been used and revered and visited, and then what they are in the contemporary Toronto context. I think that would be really rife for exploration. That's it for Episode 14 of Key Change. Thanks so much for joining us.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 58:52

We love hearing your comments and feedback and look forward to hearing your thoughts on what we talked about today. Tag us on social @CanadianOpera, or drop us a note at audiences@coc.ca.

**Julie Mclsaac** 59:07

We appreciate all the feedback we've received so far, including your reviews on Apple Podcasts.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 59:12

Next time on Key Change: we're revisiting the topic of opera and criticism. If you recall, we first chatted about this in Episode 10 with classical music critic Anne Midgette, and there was so much to explore that we broke this one into a two-parter.

**Julie Mclsaac** 59:25

So, we'll pick up that thread next time with Karen Fricker. Karen's a longtime theatre critic who writes and reviews extensively for the Toronto Star. We talked to her about arts criticism as historical record, the idea that our critical interpretations of productions now is an important lens for future generations to better understand the context in which a show was created and staged.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 59:47

And speaking of the future: we'll also hear from Karen about how Canadian youth are being empowered to find and use their voices in response to what they see on screen and on stage.

**Julie Mclsaac** 59:57

You definitely don't want to miss it

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 59:59

Bye, everyone! Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

**Julie Mclsaac** 1:00:21

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 1:00:35

So, to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

**Julie Mclsaac** 1:00:42

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 1:00:49

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at [coc.ca/KeyChange](http://coc.ca/KeyChange).