

Key Change Episode 15: Opera & Criticism – Part II

SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran, Karen Fricker

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 00:17

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

Julie Mclsaac 00:20

...and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:24

Hello again, and welcome to Episode 15.

Julie Mclsaac 00:27

It's really hard to believe we're nearly at our last podcast for the spring.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:32

We've had such [a] great time connecting with so many amazing guests over the last few months, and we've loved hearing from you. The reviews you leave on Apple Podcasts are great for helping other people find their way to us at Key Change.

Julie Mclsaac 00:44

Yeah, we'll be taking a break at the end of this season, but please keep those comments and questions coming. You can tag us anytime on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. You can also send us a voice memo; there's instructions for how to do that at coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:03

So, today we wanted to revisit a topic we explored earlier this year: opera and criticism.

Julie Mclsaac 01:09

Yeah. So, back in March, we spoke to longtime writer and music critic Anne Midgette. Now as someone whose career has spanned several decades and positions with the New York Times and Washington Post, she gave us a lot to think about when it comes to the challenges of critiquing art, the particular

challenges of critiquing opera, and what kinds of skills and considerations are required to be a quote-unquote "good critic."

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:32

We stepped back and took a long lens view at the value of opera criticism, and one thing that really stuck out for me that Anne had said was that it's important to be really honest about a production. So, if a production was just so-so, you need to say that for many reasons, one of which being if someone's new to opera and they read a review that this was a great production, but it's only a so so production, it might alienate new listeners and new audiences unnecessarily. That was the thing that I hadn't really considered and she had a lot of great thoughts like that.

Julie Mclsaac 02:08

And for anyone – if you happened to miss that podcast and this recap is piquing your interest – now's a great time for us to mention that all of our episodes can be found coc.ca/KeyChange for listening anytime.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:21

Today we're sharing our chat with theatre critic Karen Fricker.

Julie Mclsaac 02:25

Karen Fricker is Associate Professor of Dramatic Arts at Brock University, she's a theatre critic with the Toronto Star, and author of the [Robert Lepage's] Original Stage Productions: Making Theatre Global. Karen is also regularly involved in a number of initiatives around the future of theatre criticism in the digital age.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:52

Hi, Karen, thank you for joining us today.

Karen Fricker 02:55

Thanks, Robyn. And lovely to meet you, Julie.

Julie Mclsaac 02:58

You, too, Karen.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:59

So, Karen, I first met you at the Performance Criticism Training Program through Generator, and that was my introduction to theatre criticism. And I'm wondering about yours: how did you get started in it?

Karen Fricker 03:13

Well, it was long before then, Robyn. I guess my start in theatre criticism was, kind of, organic, and lateral, and a process of figuring out that it was something that you could do and that I could do. Because I was a theatre kid since I was 13, but I actually didn't know when I applied to university – and this is me revealing my ignorance for which I continually atone with my students – that, like, I didn't know you could study theatre other than being an actor. So, because I'd been a good academic

student, I said, "Oh, well, I have to go study English." And, so, I didn't really explore theatre in university, but I found that, during university and after university, the thing that I loved the most was talking about it afterwards – that was just like the most delicious thing. And I went to University of California, and then I went to London, U.K. as soon as I graduated, and I waited tables, and I just saw everything, and went to the pub afterwards and argued about it with friends, and, like, that was just so exciting. And then through, kind of, talking to folks and reading all the newspapers, I was, like, "Well, maybe I could write some of this down," and I started selling a few pieces to publications in London and, you know, fast forward about a year and a half in a bad visa situation, and I ended up in New York, and that's when I really started trying to figure it out about how to make a career as a theatre writer. So, it was a process of talking myself into believing that it was something that you could do, that I could do as a woman, and that I might actually get paid to do.

Julie McIsaac 05:07

And from the vantage point of where you're at presently, Karen: what do you see the role of a theatre critic being?

Karen Fricker 05:14

That's always the biggie. I mean, I think at its base, the role of the theatre critic is to respond to artists; it's to respond to an offer that is made in the form of an artwork. And, for me, it's also important to say that it's the continuation of a conversation that artists start up – they say, "Here's something, we got to say, we wanted to say this, we wanted to express it in this form. Here you go, audience," and a theatre critic is a member of an audience who says, "Oh, thank you for that offer. Here's some things I think about what you did." And, like, that, to me, is the heart of it. When you're a professional paid theatre critic for a mainstream outlet, it isn't just an exchange with the artists; it's an exchange with your readers, and with your editor. So, what you say is elevated over that of other audience members who might still be talking about it in the pub. And so it's public speech, it's speaking about theatre in public – think about the arts in public – and it's feedback for artists. It is a forum when you're talking about a mainstream outlet – like the Toronto Star that I write for – it's a form of consumer guidance, or that's how it's positioned, right? Like, in the real times, there's lots of stuff to see in Toronto, how are we going to choose? Well, maybe we're going to go read some reviews in The Star and have that help us figure out what we want to see. And the other piece – and this is super important to me as an academic – is it's the historical record, and that you are writing stuff down because theatre disappears, and opera disappears, and if we didn't have the written records of critics from the past, then we'd really have massive holes in our understanding of performance histories.

Robyn Grant-Moran 07:14

So, has the job changed since you started?

Karen Fricker 07:18

For me, it has. I mean, I'll speak quite subjectively about my own work, and then I'll, kind of, talk more broadly. The way my career has played out, I've always been a foreign correspondent. So, when I first started reviewing in New York through a series of hijinks, I ended up being the New York theatre critic for the Financial Times newspaper in London. So, I was writing notices from Broadway to a readership that was mostly, you know, international business people, which was, kind of, weird because I was, like,

25. And then I moved to Ireland and I started writing for The Guardian, which is a London-based newspaper about Irish theatre. So, this current moment for me, where I'm writing about theatre in Toronto for the Toronto Star, is something I always really wanted and I'm so glad I've gotten to have that in my career, which is that I'm actually writing in the market, which means I feel like the relationships are really acute and, for me, the stakes are higher because it this is my theatre world; I'm not saying to people over there, "This is what's happening in Toronto theatre," I'm saying, "This is our world." So, there's a sense of investment and responsibility. I feel like the job's changing because we are now – and I hate the word competing – but now "everyone's a critic," right? Now, thanks to the advent of the internet and social media, there's a lot of pressure on this question of whether expertise – which is what I've always understood is what the professional critic is meant to bring is that they know their field inside out – I feel that that continues to be very important, but that's always the conversation I find myself having is, "Do we really need quote-unquote "expert opinion" anymore given that so many people are out there on Twitter and Instagram and everywhere else posting their points of view?" And, I mean, I have a lot of things to say about needing a whole multiplicity of points of view from folks from all kinds of backgrounds – and we can get to that I'm sure – but, to just finish answering your question of like, "How is the job changed?" those are some of the factors that I see are really affecting the field at the moment.

Robyn Grant-Moran 09:38

And now to follow up with the really obvious: how's it stayed the same?

Karen Fricker 09:42

Well, right now it has because, I mean, what's been super interesting during COVID is the fact that responding to work that's coming through Zoom, or another media platform, is different than responding to work that's live on a stage. So, when I'm teaching my students theatre criticism – as I continue to do at Brock University – we're having to take on board a whole bunch of different factors in terms of how they're using the camera, how acting is different – if you're acting in a Zoom context, etc. But bracketing that, when I'm a working critic in the real times, I still am turning up at 7:30 [p.m.] or 8 o'clock and having that rush of adrenaline, and that moment of like, "It's me and the work." And no matter how much research I've done, no matter what kind of day I've had, no matter how annoying that person sitting next to me is, that sense of being in relationship with something that is live and in front of me, is what always drew me to it, and that still is the same when live theatre is happening.

Julie Mclsaac 10:58

And you may have touched on some of this, Karen, but we're curious about: what are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced or face presently as a theatre critic?

Karen Fricker 11:07

I mean, I think the biggest challenge facing the field of performance criticism right now is its incredible whiteness. And I think that isn't just that most of the people that I've ever known who've practiced this craft are white, university-educated folks; it's all of the structural, societal, historical factors that have made that be the case. And this is something where I feel, like, I am in a period of deep reflection and change about this work, and it has to do with the times that we're living in; it has to do with the year that was 2020; it has to do with BLM [Black Lives Matter]; and it has to do with Indigenous resurgence on

this land. And I think a lot of us who are thinking about theatre criticism in Canada right now are asking the question, "Why aren't there more voices that are representative of all of the communities and experiences in Toronto?" for example, because so much of the exciting work, and the important work, and the timely work is coming from voices that were historically underrepresented. And, I mean, I'm going to mention something that would be well-known to those of us within the theatre world – perhaps less-known in the opera world: about this time last year, an Indigenous theatre maker named Yolanda Bonnell... I wouldn't say, "disinvited," but she requested that when she did a show at Theatre Passe Muraille that Indigenous, Black and People of Colour critics – and otherwise minoritized folks, particularly queer folks – she invited them to come and respond to her work, and she preferred not to have others come respond to her work. And this caused a huge hullabaloo with reporting on it as far as away as London, U.K., and I think it was an incredibly important intervention that Yolanda was making, because it disrupted a whole bunch of conventions, because it's a convention that we get free tickets to go see work and write about it; it's a quid pro quo; it's a relationship that Canadian Opera Company has with The Globe and Mail, and the Toronto Star, and the CBC. But it was not always thus, and I think Yolanda's intervention was on behalf of herself, but I feel also it raised a question which is, "Who who can really speak and respond to this work in a way that is from a place of understanding, and sympathy, [and] resonance," that if she's offering Indigenous ceremony – which is what I understand she was doing – Robyn, as an Indigenous person has a way into that work, and I would go so far as to say, almost a right, to speak or to be present to see that work that might not be as... I feel Robyn's is a more important voice to hear about that piece than mine.

Robyn Grant-Moran 14:20

Well, and to your point about expertise: it's one thing that came up in a previous episode when we were talking with Hannah Chan-Hartley, and I'd asked her a question about Baroque opera, and she's like, "Oh, well, I can't really speak to that because it's not my specialty." Like, that's totally okay to do genre-wise, but the whole "bug" situation, it became incredibly clear that it wasn't about expertise; it was about "Who felt entitled to sit in that seat, and get that ticket, and have their voice heard?" But how can you be an expert if you're not part of that world, or you're not actively involved with that world?

Karen Fricker 15:03

Yeah. This is flashing me back to a really interesting set of conversations that I had when I was teaching and working as a critic in London, U.K.: when some of the senior white male critics went to review a musical that may or may not have been "Wicked," but let's just say it was "Wicked," and they just didn't get it. And the question was raised by my students, like, "Why don't they send teenage female-identifying people or even teenage male-identifying people? Like, who's the work for and why aren't we hearing their voices?" And there has since been some really fantastic musical theatre scholarship that's been written by the critic Stacy Wolf in the States about female responses, young female responses, the role of fan discourses around certain kinds of art forms. That question has been circulating, for me, for a while but it has really landed in a really acute way at the moment in Toronto around "Why should somebody hear from me if they could hear from Robyn about Indigenous work?" And I'm working on a project at the moment around the Obsidian Theatre Company/CBC collaboration "21 Black Futures," which is an incredibly ambitious and important articulation around the question of the futures of Blackness, and we commissioned 21 Black university students to respond to the works because that's the voices... they are the future of Blackness! And – the "we" here is York University,

Brock University, CBC and Obsidian – we said, "It's response. It doesn't have to be a quote-unquote 'review,'" because there's all kinds of colonial patriarchal histories around this idea of the solo-written review, where it's one person laying it down in a really authoritative and, kind of, end of conversation way. We said, "response." And we've got poems, we've got songs, we've got thought pieces, young people recording themselves so you can see their embodied person expressing these ideas. And, for me, that is the future of theatre criticism. And this is all happening, like, super real-time, that 21 Black Futures to me is proof of concept, and I've been so wanting this concept to be proved, which is what kinds of amazing things come out when you pull away the formality and pull away the histories and pull away the power differentials and just say, "Here's an offer. What do you think?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 17:39

And I expect in, like, 10 years from now, this is gonna be an incredibly memorable moment in your career. But, until we get there: what's particularly memorable up until this point being a critic – your experience as a professional?

Karen Fricker 17:57

I think – and I have a lot of conversations about this with Carly Maga, with whom I share the job of theatre critic of the Toronto Star – the conversations we get to have, the rooms we get to be in, the access that we have, the sense that we are part of a community – a particular part of a community but, you know, that is experiencing incredible growth and change – that we can help getting the word out about what's going on on the scene. I love to be in the middle of a scene, I just love it! And I love to feel like I have a voice within culture and within the scene, and that's why I think I underlined before, like, why this has been such an exciting five years at The Star is because we're in the community; it's not far away, it's here. So, I think my most memorable experiences are feeling like we get to say to our readers, "Guess what? This is so exciting! This is so cool what's happening! You want to know about this!" and to feel like we have agency in figuring out what the important stories are that we want our readers to know.

Julie McIsaac 19:09

Karen, I'm curious. So, in addition to your work in theatre and theatre criticism, I'm really curious about your perspectives on opera practice and opera production, and I'm told that you did see "Hadrian" at the COC – so a couple years ago – and you've recently published a book about Robert Lepage and he and Ex Machina have directed a number of productions for the COC. So, we'd love to hear about your connections to these works, and also that theatre/opera crossover and what you've witnessed in attending those productions by [Peter] Hinton or by Lepage, for example.

Karen Fricker 19:40

Right. I mean, I've been thinking back to... I am pretty confident that the first operas I ever saw were "Bluebeard's Castle" and "Erwartung," which were COC productions, Lepage's first opera productions, which then went to the Brooklyn Academy of Music [BAM] in New York, where I was then living and, at that point, I was quite interested in Lepage's work as a journalist and, so, of course, I would go to see the latest Lepage at BAM, and that was really exciting. I had nothing to compare it to at the time, but I was like, "I thought they were pretty good," and I think they've held up. What Lepage brings to the plate is an incredible visual sense – like, he creates total works of performance with incredible acts of

onstage transformation of objects and bodies. And I think he chose well with those short opera pieces where there were so many transformations that he could create on stage. I also, at that time in New York, was working for a company called Stagebill, which doesn't exist anymore sadly, but it created program magazines for performing arts organizations. And, so, we served most of the constituent organizations of Lincoln Center. So, I got to go to The Met. So, I was spoiled super young because I got to see, like, some of the most magnificent, beautifully sung, beautifully played lavishly staged operas. But when I was thinking about opera experiences that have really stuck with me, it is interesting because it is the ones that are, kind of, theatre crossovers because I'm remembering "Satyagraha," the Philip Glass opera, that Phelim McDermott directed with Improbable theatre at the ENO [English National Opera] taking a form of theatre-making that I very much identified with this particular theatre company, and just blowing it out, like, sonically and logistically, like, massive chorus. And, I guess, my appreciation of opera – and it's, kind of, an obvious thing to say about opera – is that there's so many more levels and elements of expressivity, and theatricality, and meaning-making that are available to artists. I often can find opera challenging because I'm so used to plot and character, and when it takes, like, 10 minutes to say one thing – and because I'm not music people like you are, that I can't appreciate the nuance of the music and what "new" they're bringing to the music – and I find that frustrating. But, also, we all have stuff to learn, right? So, I mean, I feel like that's an area in my work as a spectator, where I can really grow: is learning more about music.

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:46

In our practice with Key Change, we, kind of, look at conventional traditional roles and think about deconstructing them or asking, "Why?" And I feel that that parallels very nicely with the work you do with Circus and its Others – is that correct?

Karen Fricker 23:02

That's true. Circus and its Others is a international research project that I've been co-directing for about six years, to kind of question to what extent mainstream circus practices continue to be heteronormative, racialized, not progressive in terms of the stories they're telling, and the performance languages and the representations in them. And this was, kind of, literally a question that I asked with a couple friends in the foyer of a theater in Montreal, and it's turned into this international inquiry because what we found is that circus-makers and circus scholars around the world are very engaged with this question. So, we've been doing digital panels during COVID. So, we just had a panel about Australian circus, we had an incredible panel about how circus is affecting theatre artists around the globe, and we had about five continents represented hearing from African circus-makers, Middle Eastern circus-makers, and it's all glued together around this question of "circus as a performing art form that makes meanings," and asking questions about, like, "What tropes are being circulated and recirculated in question," and "How can circus be used to break down some stereotypical representations?" So, I think that it sounds like there is, kind of, a vibration there between that and what you do here on this podcast because I know, as a Key Change fan, that you're constantly looking to ask questions about representation.

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:49

I've kind of had this niggling feeling for a long time that there's just a lot of parallels between traditional opera and traditional circus with the various roles, the sort of high flying aerialist, the clown, the you

know... and why certain people have certain roles, and I just, kind of, feel like, "Is the opera just aristocratic circus?"

Karen Fricker 25:17

I have to say I don't know enough about opera or traditional circus in order to answer that question fully, but I can take a little stab. Because traditional circus is, I think, picture Barnum and Bailey, picture Three-Ring Circus, picture... it's vignette-based, right? It's, like, "Here's the animal act," and then "Here's the juggler," and then "Here's the high-wire act. Contemporary circus – picture Cirque du Soleil – is much more theatrical- It doesn't really have a plot but it, kind of, has a theme, and it's brought together through, like, musical and scenic elements that give it a, kind of, cohesion. What we have found incredibly persistent in circus is that the apparatuses and the acts are gendered, right? So, that aerial is feminine, juggling is masculine, clown tends to be mostly masculine, and hand-to-hand – which is anything that's two performers, where one is, kind of, the base and the other one is lifted – the base tends to be a dude and the lifted person tends to be a light woman. And what's super exciting that's happening in some progressive circus practices is consciously breaking down those tropes by having – and I saw the National Circus School of Montreal has a show every year where their graduating class does their act, right? And seeing male-male pairings in trapeze is incredible; and seeing a female as a base in a hand-to-hand act, like, that is subversive, fantastic stuff. And, I feel bad, kind of, saying that that's subversive in 2021 but the work is still to be done to be really breaking down these stereotypes. And they come for a reason: like, masculine bodies tend to be bigger and heavier – so there's a reason why there's the base – but how about a sturdy girl as a base? And what are the aesthetic gendered... what are the implications of that? I find the implications of that really exciting. Does that resonate with you, Robyn, and what I'm saying?

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:39

Yeah! Earlier in March, the four co-founders of Amplified Opera, along with some other artists, had a live digital conversation about gender and opera. (And that's actually still available for viewing online: it's at coc.ca/GenderAndOpera.) There have been more non-binary and trans artists getting a lot of credit where credit is due finally. But those totally challenge the norms – like, you have, like each vocal "fach" has its, kind of, archetype, and its story. So, yeah, it sounds like I'm not far off but maybe not as close as I thought either.

Julie McIsaac 28:26

Talking about, like, what's on the horizon or, like, this exciting stuff that's percolating. Karen, we're curious about how do you see criticism evolving over the next few years?

Karen Fricker 28:35

Well, if I have anything to do with it, um, I am really excited to see what is going to happen when more Indigenous, Black and Person of Colour voices – and otherwise minoritized voices – find their way into theatre criticism as I believe they will. I'm working on a few projects trying to... I feel like the biggest thing that we can do right now, in Canadian theatre criticism, is lower barriers for participation in theatre criticism. I know this is sounding very top-down and "white savior-y" and I don't intend it that way – those of us who are professional theatre critics in Canada do tend to be white, college-educated folks, and how can we be using our privilege, our responsibility in ways that might lower those barriers and

might offer opportunities, find pathways for folks that might not previously have thought that this was something that was available to them, or they even wanted to do to try it out? Because I've always said to my theatre criticism students – and I've been teaching theatre criticism for 25 years – "I don't think I'm going to turn you all." Like, there's going to be one or two students out of a class of 30 that want to do this; it's not for everyone. But there might be others who might find that they really love this; they might have the experience that I had, like, figuring out, like, "Oh, this is a job. Like, I can respond to the arts and people are gonna want to hear what I have to say." And, so, I think the – for want of a better word – "diversification" of the field is something that I'm really, really looking forward to seeing happen.

Julie Mclsaac 30:26

You already spoke to us about that project in response to 21 Black Futures. But, just wondering: is there anything else that's giving you hope right now, that's getting you excited about what's to come?

Karen Fricker 30:35

Totally. Well, 21 Black Futures, there's a lot of momentum behind that and, so, I'm working on a project with a couple of academic colleagues to have a BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Colour] critics lab this summer and intensive, and we're talking to a few Toronto theatre organizations. The question for us was, "How are we going to find these young folks?" Right? Well, the response that we had to 21 Black Futures, to the student response project, we got three times as many students who wanted to do it as we could take, which was an unexpected bounty. And, again, this is one of these weird things that's positive out of COVID: it was not location-based. So, we had responses from all over the country. So, I'm looking forward to reaching out to those young folks and other young folks, and bringing people together to start to have them work with some more established BIPOC critics, writers, artists, and just starting to stir that pot – going to start putting a lot more energy into seeing what this summer project is going to look like.

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:43

Welcome to the bonus question round! First question: in your operagoing experience, is there a production that has really stood out?

Karen Fricker 31:52

I spoiled because I already said it: Satyagraha. I've really enjoyed, since I've moved to Toronto, getting to see a number of shows at the COC. The opera experiences that stand out to me are the ones where theatre-makers, like Peter Hinton, move into opera-making and you get to see them stretching themselves and embracing all those forms of expression.

Julie Mclsaac 32:13

Yeah, it's always so exciting to see someone at the precipice, or at that threshold between what they do typically and, like, that new form of expression. So exciting. So, this might be hard to choose from but: what theatre experience has had the greatest impact on you?

Karen Fricker 32:27

No, that's easy because it was life-changing. It was in 1990 and I was in London, U.K., in the "waiting tables and seeing everything phase," and I went to the National Theatre to see a work by this Quebec theatre artist that... the quotes in the paper were amazing, and it was Robert Lepage and the piece was called Tectonic Plates, and this was, kind of, his second major international, big show, and it was astonishingly fresh to me: his stagecraft, the transformational nature of the staging, the use of multiple languages on stage – because, of course, he's always playing with as a bilingual Francophone Quebecer – but there was semaphore, like, there was, you know, flag-waving semaphore signs in the show, was another form of expression. And he was in it as an actor; he played a character who was, what we would now say, trans, although we didn't have that language back then. And Robert Lepage is an astonishing actor. He underplays everything, that's his M.O. [modus operandi], and just he draws energy by not over-emoting but under-emoting – and this is part of his philosophy of acting – and I was like, "What, what, what was that?" And that was the beginning, the germ of what became a PhD, and what became a book, and what's now been most of my career following, and chronicling, and engaging with the work of this artist who's sometimes controversial, and who has made a really significant contribution to performing arts in the world over the past 40 years.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:10

Which theatre artist do you most admire right now?

Karen Fricker 34:13

Oh, my goodness, I made a list! Crystal Pite, amazing Canadian choreographer; Taylor Mack – out of New York – incredible drag artist; Michael Keegan-Dolan, who is an Irish choreographer who had a production of "Swan Lake" that was here a few summers ago at Luminato. It's interesting because I found myself saying a lot of people who work at the boundaries of theatre and dance, because a company that my friend and colleague Carly turned me onto is rockbottom dance here in Toronto. Alyssa Martin is a choreographer, unbelievably fresh, millennial dance company, theatre dance company love their work! And basically anyone in the 21 Black Futures project – like, that's 63 amazing Black Canadian theatre artists. Because, as we speak, those monodramas have all dropped on CBC Gem and CBC Arts website and, so, I'm still making my way through them. I mean, I'm borrowing what Carly said, which is, like, "Since COVID, it's the one time I've felt, like, literally that excitement of the lights going down." Like, it really feels, like, such... it's so visceral, what they're doing, and it's such an incredible showcase for incredible Black Canadian theatre artists.

Julie Mclsaac 35:29

Fantastic, thank you. Lightning round! So, just the first thing that comes to mind – Karen, go with your gut! Who is your favourite playwright?

Karen Fricker 35:40

Caryl Churchill.

Robyn Grant-Moran 35:42

Favourite director?

Karen Fricker 35:44

Robert Lepage!

Julie Mclsaac 35:46

The last show you saw in-person?

Karen Fricker 35:49

I kind of want to say it was "Hamilton." I mean, I think there might have been a few since then, but that was the last major opening I attended before it all crashed.

Robyn Grant-Moran 35:59

Favourite pre- or post-show meal?

Karen Fricker 36:02

I have to say, when I'm reviewing, what I do after a show is: I go home and have a glass of wine and read the play again. So, I'm, kind of, boring – like, that's your asocial answer – but I will say, right now, I would gnaw on a dry crust of bread in front of a theatre if it meant that I was going in there to see live theatre. Like, you know, I'd just do anything to be back live in a theatre again.

Julie Mclsaac 36:23

Do you have a least favourite theatre trend?

Karen Fricker 36:27

The fact that there isn't any right now.

Julie Mclsaac 36:31

Yeah, we got to stop doing that! We gotta get out of that!

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:33

We got to fix that trend!

Julie Mclsaac 36:34

This silly habit!

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:36

So, intermission or one-act plays?

Karen Fricker 36:39

Ah. I do like a tight 80 minutes, I do have to say. But I also – because I, you know, am somebody who's been following Robert Lepage's work for 40 years, no, 30 years – I also like an epic. Like, I sat through all of Einstein on the Beach, I had a transcendent experience. So, like, really tight and short or super long, so that it's an event and you spend the whole day, and you get to know the people sitting around you, and it's, like, life in the theatre.

Julie Mclsaac 37:15

What do you consider to be the best seat in the house?

Karen Fricker 37:18

Ah, well, where the critic sits, of course! And this is, of course, gonna completely undermine everything I've said about how we need to diversify, democratize criticism, but critics historically sit on the aisle, and the reason for that is because, back in the day, they would literally need to run out of the theatre as the applause was happening because they could make a deadline for that night's edition. And, so, now, typically, critics are sat on aisles, and I have gotten incredibly spoiled because you can throw your legs out into the aisle, and you don't have another person next to you. So, for me, like, 12 rows back on the aisle is a super happy space for me.

Julie Mclsaac 38:02

Karen, this has been great. It's been lovely to, sort of, talk about that theatre stuff and the opera stuff and just your enthusiasm for things. Like, 21 Black Futures is getting me excited and enthusiastic to then dig in and just, sort of, find that spark again because I know it's been a hard year.

Karen Fricker 38:16

Yeah. And thank you so much for being interested in talking to a theatre critic because I know this is an opera podcast, but I know from having listened to the podcast that you were coming at it from such interesting angles.

Julie Mclsaac 38:35

Robyn, it was so great to meet Karen. I've heard about her a lot through you and she's even more wonderful than you described. So, a great honour and really fascinating to have that chat with her.

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:45

Yeah, it was really fun to actually get to bring someone who helped me find my voice...

Julie Mclsaac 38:51

Right!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:52

...into our space.

Julie Mclsaac 38:53

Right!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:55

I just want to take a moment to say thank you to Generator, which is an incubator in Toronto that focuses on mentoring, teaching, and innovation in the theatre arts or performing arts. They ran the Performance Criticism Training Program. The program was targeting BIPOC, queer and women's voices – those are voices historically underrepresented in general but especially so in criticism. So, it was really a great initiative and without it I wouldn't be here. So, it was cool to talk to her.

Julie Mclsaac 39:29

Well, and really cool that Karen, she reviews theatre, but she has this great interest and knowledge about the work of Robert Lepage, who's an artist that COC audiences might be very familiar with due to the fact that he works in the opera field as well.

Robyn Grant-Moran 39:43

I read her book cover to cover a couple of weeks ago, and [it] was a very fascinating read. I don't know that it's casual light reading for anybody who is not in academia, but one thing I learned that really, really recontextualized Robert Lepage and how I look at his style of production, I don't know enough about Québécois culture: as an Anglo, I don't recognize that there is maybe some self-deprecation and some humour in it, because it's a piece I'm missing not being so close to that culture. So, it was really important to hear someone who could translate that for me.

Julie Mclsaac 40:28

What I'm hearing is that the critic has an important role to play, or can play a really important role, in adding this additional context and knowledge, and they can do some research and unpack things for us so that, as we receive the work, if we're lacking for whatever reason – whether it's a cultural barrier or a linguistic barrier – if we don't have that knowledge for ourselves, the critic can be a guide for us, an aid for us through that process.

Robyn Grant-Moran 40:51

Yeah, absolutely. And that's the importance of having critics who are really knowledgeable about what they are talking about: it's more than just, "I like this," or "I didn't like this." It's being able to articulate where it fits...

Julie Mclsaac 41:06

...in the larger conversation, maybe.

Robyn Grant-Moran 41:09

Exactly. So, that just changed my relationship, that little tiny puzzle piece changed my relationship to Robert Lepage. There have been a lot of difficult things about him that I don't want to be an apologist for but I do feel that maybe there are things I miss not being an expert, being an outsider to his work, and to the culture that his work is created within.

Julie Mclsaac 41:38

Well, it makes me wonder about when I attend a production, who else is there in the room, in the audience, that has a different lived experience than I do, and therefore might be receiving or viewing the work differently. And when I attended "bug," which is that production that Karen referred to – so, Yolanda Bonnell's performance – they (Cole Alvis and Yolanda Bonnell) before the production began, they took a moment to honour the Indigenous women in the room, and so it brought my attention, as an audience-goer, to the fact that Yolanda wanted to share this performance to honour these women, and it brought our attention to that, and it placed me in a different position to the work knowing those women were there, and that that work was for them. These are just really wonderful, innovative, forward-looking, empathetic, community-based ways of encouraging response to work, and

encouraging audience members to think about how they are positioned in relationship to the work. And all this is to say I think this is a really exciting time to be an audience member receiving work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:35

I like how it challenges our notions of expertise, and what expertise is. Like, conventionally you talk about in journalism and criticism, objectivity is a really big thing. But how can you be both objective and an expert, and not too close but close enough to understand? It ends up erasing a lot of proximity that I think is necessary to fully appreciate very culturally specific works.

Julie McIsaac 43:09

And not to diminish the importance of what you're saying, Robyn – because I think it's increasingly a big part, an important part of the conversation – but I also appreciate what Karen said in terms of ages: what is the age of the person who's receiving this work, and how does that affect their proximity, like you said, potentially to the work and their response? So, she spoke about *Wicked* and I know I had an experience seeing the "Jane Eyre" musical in Toronto when I was about 16 years old, and I wept, and the collar of my shirt was just completely soaked through with tears, I had this transcendent experience. And then that show goes to Broadway, has some revisions but never has quote-unquote "success" – you know, it wasn't received very well by the critics, and it wasn't received very well by, you know, Jane Eyre experts in their 40s, or people who love the novel, and all of that is okay. But in my 16-year-old experience, it was this beautiful, transcendent moment that was ultimately transformative and super successful in terms of the impact it had on me.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:06

How is the criticism positioned? Because clearly, it was ideal for teenagers. It should be okay for a critic to say, "Hey, you know what, I'm a 40-year-old white dude, I'm whatever... I didn't appreciate it because I was not the intended audience. However, this seems to be ideal for teenagers," and it would be great to then follow that with a teenager's response, and for that to be accessible to the audience – to potential audiences or just anybody who's interested in the concept of the Jane Eyre musical and is it worthwhile or not?

Julie McIsaac 44:51

Right, right!

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:53

Because, like, there's a power in saying, "I don't know," Like, "I am an expert but this is a thing that I am not an expert in. Let's hand it over." Just to get on my soapbox for a moment: without that, one runs the risk of dismissing productions that can have a great impact for certain audiences – in this case, teenage girls. And returning to the notion of objectivity: if the majority of critics are at such a distance from the intended audience, critics can wind up judging the value or merit of something based on a set of stereotypes or misunderstandings, and maintain the status quo, which only serves a small portion of audiences – especially when getting into really culturally specific works. It's also just unreasonable to ask a very small number of writers to be experts in so much when we're in a city like Toronto, which has so many diverse people and cultures. Having more voices means more accurate representation and understanding. Sharing is caring!

Julie Mclsaac 46:00

Yeah, I remember seeing *Spring Awakening* in New York on Broadway, and I was older at this point – I was no longer a teenager – but I watched the teenagers who are receiving that show, and who were cheering and so moved. And I could see that and it was a really neat experience to be there, experiencing the show in the way that I was, which was disparate, which was different than what they were experiencing, and to see both of those happening – both of them being real, and true, and legitimate reactions to the work, and yet they were very different. And I'm reminded of what Anne [Midgette] said in our previous criticism episode about a successful review for her leaves that space for the audience members to read it and go, "Okay, I would have liked it," or "I would not have liked it," but to have enough information in context. And then, like you said, isn't it beautiful to think, "Can we open up who is responding," so you get that 40-year-old White man, but then you also get, like, a bunch of different voices speaking to the work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:53

One thing I wanted to mention, just as a note of housekeeping, in the interview, I referenced to Hannah Chan-Hartley's interview, and talking about me asking a question about Baroque opera, and her saying, "It's not my specialty." I did not mean to conflate her as a critic – that is not her job – however, I just wanted to use that to exemplify that, in professional circles, it is totally okay to say, "I'm not an expert in that, I do right now." And that was my intention: not to conflate her or her work with Karen or Anne. Just wanted to put that out there because I realized afterwards, it sounded like I might have done that, and that was not my intention, just that if there's space for it, in Hannah's world, there's space for it in our world, too.

Julie Mclsaac 47:50

Right, that we all have the right to say, "You know what, I don't know; that's not my wheelhouse. That's not what I know best but maybe there's someone else who does, who can offer something." And for anyone who's curious, thanks, Robyn, for taking the time to clarify that. And that's in Episode Two [Sounds Like Opera]. So, anyone who wants to check out Hannah's interview, you can go back and do so. Now another thing we talked about with Karen, which I think is very important to flag, is the "critics as keepers of the historical record," and what an important role they have to play, so that decades from now, centuries from now, they provide us with this way of looking back on what was accomplished during this period.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:27

I had never really considered the importance of criticism or writing about performances as a historical document until I was in my 30s and doing my undergrad. And I was doing a presentation on "*Tristan und Isolde*," and I read a review that said – and I believe I'm quoting pretty directly – that it was "sonic pornography." And it's silly and it's a little salacious but it really solidified, in that moment, the importance of criticism and writing about performance as historical documents. In reading that, I could understand that this opera that I listened to, and I hear so much longing, and so much sensuality, and sexuality, and I take for granted that it's this really intense, sexy, longing opera, but it was scandalous – like, when they heard that for the first time. So, I could understand it very differently than I do now. Like, it wasn't always, "Oh yeah, that's that hot opera."

Julie Mclsaac 50:12

And, likewise, I think it gives us insight into what it takes to create something great or something enduring. For example, the reviews around the initial reception of "Madama Butterfly" tell us that the Madama Butterfly that we know here and now – and we could have a whole episode about Madama Butterfly, and the complexities there, and the things to unpack, and there's certainly a lot – but when it was first performed, it wasn't received very rapturously; there was a lot of people who pointed out that there were problems. And, so, a lot of revisions happened before it became the work that achieved greater success. And the critics, and what they wrote about at the time, are part of our record of that and part of why we know these works, what had to happen in order for them to become what they became.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:56

Yeah, as a, sort of, funny sidebar: I feel like the original, from what I've read of reviews, would actually be more entertaining in some ways now – I mean, just to speak to the character of Kate Pinkerton, that she was largely cut out entirely. And what's interesting about it now – like, how would that fit in today's narrative? How would the critics respond if that wasn't cut out today?

Julie Mclsaac 51:25

Well, and that makes me think, Robyn, that whether these critics are offering conversations here and now or whether we're looking back 200 years ago on what the critics were writing about and documenting, to me, it's a really good reminder that we're all participating in the ongoing story of opera production or theatre production, and that we're just one chapter of it or even just one little paragraph of one chapter in it, and that we're all part of this constantly evolving whole entity that will continue to move forward beyond us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:56

Thanks for joining us in our small little paragraph.

Julie Mclsaac 52:08

We're so glad you joined us for Episode 15. And a special thanks to Karen Fricker for being our wonderful guest on this one.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:15

We also wanted to share a happy update about a work discussed earlier: since we first recorded this episode, Yolanda Bonnell's "bug" has been nominated in the Drama Category for a Governor General's Literary Award.

Julie Mclsaac 52:28

Some very well deserved recognition and congratulations to all the finalists.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:32

Yes, congratulations. Next time on the podcast we're throwing the spotlight on a building that's been key to so many of the stories and topics discussed so far on the show: the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts [FSC].

Julie Mclsaac 52:46

That's right. Our Toronto venue was the first purpose-built opera house in Canada and has served as a local and international stage for artists of all kinds as well as a community hub.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:57

We'll connect with the architect behind the venues distinctive design, Jack Diamond, co-founder of Diamond Schmitt Architects.

Julie Mclsaac 53:05

We'll also be speaking with Janice Oliver, who oversaw the building of the opera house.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:10

And if you'd like to know what it's like performing in that incredible space, we'll hear from an artist who's no stranger to the COC's mainstage, Sondra Radvanovsky.

Julie Mclsaac 53:20

Yes, the star soprano last performed at the FSC in a stunning production of "Rusalka" in 2019, and we're sure she has many stories from that stage.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:30

Oh my gosh, I don't doubt that at all. It's going to be a great one, so make sure to join us.

Julie Mclsaac 53:36

Bye, everyone!

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:43

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 53:55

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 54:09

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

Julie Mclsaac 54:16

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

Robyn Grant-Moran [54:23](#)

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